STAR WARS: ANDOR
THE FINAL COUNTDOWN BEGINS

THE LAST OF US
CAST AND CREW TALK SEASON TWO

DOCTOR WHO
RUSSELL T DAVIES EXCLUSIVE!

SFX

SFX 30 YEARS

ON-SET EXCLUSIVE!

BLACK MIRROR

Back on board the USS Callister with Charlie Brooker

DUNE: AWAKENING
A NEW BATTLE FOR ARRAKIS

THE WHEEL OF TIME
ON SET FOR SEASON THREE

DROP
PAGING BLUMHOUSE'S NEW THRILLER

FUTURE

PLUS! STRANGER THINGS | THE BONDSMAN | THE HANDMAID'S TALE | GREEN LANTERN
JURASSIC WORLD: CHAOS THEORY | SOLOMON KANE | CAPTAIN PLANET | MARK MILLAR

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FEATURES

24 BLACK MIRROR
We are experiencing technical difficulties...

34 ANDOR: A STAR WARS STORY
The rebel with a cause returns for the final season.

42 DOCTOR WHO
Belinda Chandra boards the TARDIS.

52 THE LAST OF US
We talk to a bunch of fun guys.

56 DROP
Maybe digital detox isn't such a bad idea.

60 THE WHEEL OF TIME
What a Waste... in the best way.

66 THE HANDMAID'S TALE
Talkin' bout a revolution in season six.

RED ALERT

6 THE BONDSMAN
666 degrees of Kevin Bacon.

8 DUNE: AWAKENING
Things go from bad to worm.

11 WACKY RACES
On with the Muttley!

14 ABSOLUTE GREEN LANTERN
We'll give you a ring...

15 CAPTAIN PLANET
Most ecological, Captain!

REVIEWS

74 MICKEY 17
A double dose of Robert Pattinson, ladies (and lads)!

77 DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN
Matt Murdock gets the horn(s) once again.

78 THE ELECTRIC STATE
Shocking, positively shocking.

86 DISSOLUTION
Reality unravels in Nicholas Binge's latest.

92 THE NEW GODS
Is this new take on the DC title worthy of worship?

REGULARS

70 BROUGHT TO BOOK
The aforementioned Binge fellow profiled.

91 THE WRITE STUFF
Wicked's Gregory Maguire answers our questionnaire.

96 BLASTERMIND
Dreams are the theme of this issue's quiz.

98 TOTAL RECALL
Looking back at goofy RPG *Tunnels & Trolls*.

Captain's Log

This picture was supposed to be on the actual set of the USS Callister, back in action once again for the new season of *Black Mirror*. Because, of course, I don't have nearly enough photos of me inside spaceships or sitting in captain's chairs. It happened, I was there, the obligatory mugshot was taken.

But stupid old me didn't heed the warnings of my groaning mobile that my iCloud was full and – I kid you not – literally the night before I planned to sit and transfer everything from my phone to an external drive, I got mugged and had my phone stolen. USS Callister photo gone forever! Lost media, like Pamela Nash had thrown it in a skip. So instead you have a not-quite-as-authentic version of the bridge set from a recent Netflix event. You can see the *real* thing in all its shiny beauty on page 24.

Sadly no photos of me larking around on the *Doctor Who* soundstages either, as our set visit for season two was for the finale – no cameras, no spoilers! Spoiler: The Big Bad is actually season 24's Pipe People. Food pipe? Why didn't you say!

This issue is groaning at the seams almost as much as my old phone was. Tell your friends! Buy them a subscription! Support physical media!

Anyway, back up your phones and be safe – see you in four weeks.

Darren X

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Rants & Raves

Inside the *SFX* hive mind

DARREN SCOTT EDITOR

RAVES

→ Loving *Daredevil: Born Again*, one of the best things Marvel has done in years.
→ *The Monkey* and *Heart Eyes* – haven't had so much fun in the cinema for ages.
→ The Disney+ trailer for *Doctor Who* looks very exciting.

RANTS

→ *The Substance* was robbed at The Oscars.

IAN BERRIMAN DEPUTY EDITOR

RAVES

→ So much cool stuff in the *Who* trailer. I love the retro stylings of those robots. And Mr Ring-A-Ding's piggy snout is giving me the ick.
→ Though it was a bit overlong, I enjoyed *Mickey 17*. Tim Key stole the movie from Robert Pattinson, though. But the biggest reaction from my Bristol audience was when *Points West* presenter Sabet Choudhury turned up!
→ Had a great chat with screenwriter Matthew Jacobs about the seriously underappreciated 1988 film *Paperhouse*. Retrospective feature coming... er, sometime soon-ish.
→ After reading about *A Time Before Genesis*, the 1986 sci-fi/vampire/conspiracy novel by Les Dawson (yes, *that* Les Dawson), I need a copy. It sounds properly mental.

JONATHAN COATES ART EDITOR

RAVES

→ Rediscovered *Dark Skies* this month – a series I loved in the late '90s but somehow forgot. For those that haven't seen it, it's a 1960s-set alt history/*X-Files*-esque alien conspiracy drama. JT Walsh is a standout as the head of secret government agency Majestic 12. Just 19 episodes, I recommend.

ED RICKETTS PRODUCTION EDITOR

RAVES

→ *Split Fiction* is not only another fantastic game from Hazelight Studios (*It Takes Two*), it's got some wicked little insights into the tropes of both fantasy and sci-fi. Plus no microtransactions, loot boxes, skins or any of that other nonsense.

NICK SETCHFIELD EDITOR AT LARGE

RIP

→ Gene Hackman – maybe not the Lex Luthor of the comics but the perfect sly, droll foil to Christopher Reeve's noble Superman. I still laugh at "It's open, come in..."
→ Raising a Vesper to Bond producers Barbara Broccoli and Michael G Wilson. Thanks for so many years of loyal secret service.

TARA BENNETT US EDITOR

RAVES

→ Animation fans, you need to see *The Day The Earth Blew Up: A Looney Tunes Movie* (UK release date TBC – Ed). Perfect voicing of Daffy and Bugs, gorgeous 2D animation, and a continuation of the humour and tone from the Golden Age. An absolute gift for WB animation fans.

RANTS

→ Why can't I buy a *Mickey 17* plush Creeper?

THE FUTURE FIRST!

Red Alert

APRIL 2025

NEWS //// INTERVIEWS //// INSIGHT //// VAMPIRES!

6

DEMON DAYS

Kevin Bacon plays dead in Blumhouse horror series The Bondsman

Highlights

8

DUNE: AWAKENING

It's Arrakis, but not as you know it in new sand-planet survival multiplayer game.

12

JURASSIC WORLD: CHAOS THEORY

The gang are back – and we mean all the gang – after *that* shocking cliffhanger.

19

STRANGER THINGS

Our new monthly page featuring all the latest from Hawkins and the Upside Down.

Oi! Ducking and bombing are prohibited, you know.

Hub with his badass mum Kitty (Beth Grant).

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Kevin Bacon: Demon Hunter

Showrunner Erik Oleson embraces the absurd for **The Bondsman**

WORDS: **STEVE O'BRIEN**

AS SMALL-SCREEN CONCEPTS GO, there are few juicier than "Kevin Bacon hunts demons". That was the back-of-a-fag-packet idea put to writer/producer Erik Oleson in 2023, a job offer he simply couldn't say no to.

"It was very exciting to develop the tone of Appalachian noir mixed with horror," he enthuses to Red Alert, "and to bring my stamp to it." The idea had been brought to Prime Video by Bacon himself, alongside Blumhouse supremo Jason Blum who'd been sent the treatment by newcomer Grainger David. Realising they had the DNA of something special, Amazon turned to Oleson, a veteran of shows such as *Daredevil*, *Carnival Row* and *The Man In The High Castle*, to shape David's concept into a potential series.

The result, *The Bondsman*, stars Bacon as Hub Halloran, a grizzled bounty hunter who is murdered, before being brought back to life by the Devil with an order to hunt rogue demons that have broken out of Hell. And yes, with a concept as batshit as that, it does poke fun at itself, as Oleson is keen to point out. "I like it where the audience doesn't know whether or not they're going to be in a moving, dramatic scene, or laughing their ass off, or watching a demon get a chainsaw to the face," he says.

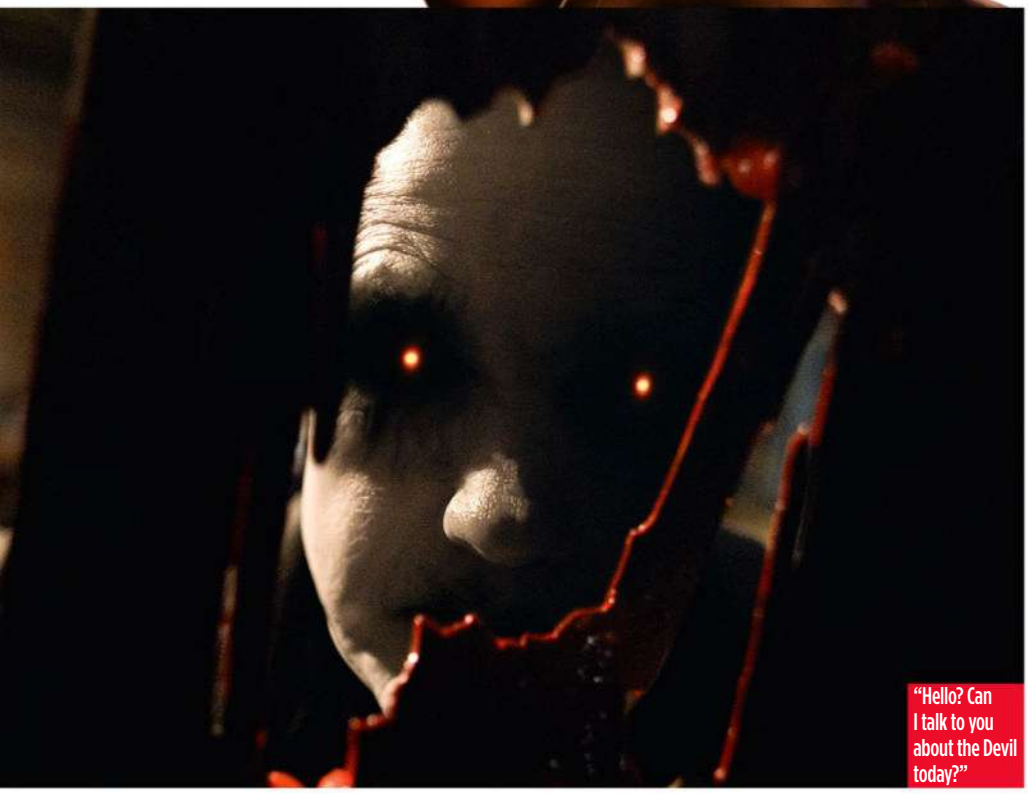
There are plenty of quirky touches in the show. Though Hell and the Devil aren't actually shown, our connection to the netherworld is depicted through old-style fax machines (through which Hub gets his orders). "We didn't want to show the Devil," Oleson explains, "but we really were attracted to the idea that he had this goofy front company, Pot O' Gold, that communicated by fax. This anachronistic element, it just made me laugh!"

And then there's its star Kevin Bacon. Tonally speaking, the actor's movie *Tremors* isn't a million miles from *The Bondsman*'s dizzying mix of action, drama and comedy. "If you're treating the story honestly and it were really happening to you, you would have this Kevin Bacon question mark expression of 'What the fuck is actually happening?'" Oleson laughs.

"This is very much a WHAT THE FUCK show, right? Like, what the fuck are these idiots writing? What the fuck is happening? What's going to happen next? Let's be honest, we've seen countless stories about demons from Hell. We've seen countless stories about

Hub Halloran (Kevin Bacon) is in a bad way.

Musician Jennifer Nettles plays Maryanne.



"Hello? Can I talk to you about the Devil today?"

deals with the Devil. I think what makes this show unique is its mash-up of those tropes, which are inverted and reinvented in ways that you don't expect."

Of course, Kevin Bacon comes with a ton of star power, and is credited as a producer on the series. Oleson has only good things to say about the show's 66-years-young leading man.

"Kevin is one of these people who has worked with every great filmmaker of the last two generations," he says. "The guy's literally a household name and an icon.

"I called my mom to say I had finally made it in Hollywood when I got texted a Kevin Bacon meme by Kevin Bacon! Kevin and I really built the show from the ground up, and he and I see eye to eye about the optimal way to run a television series. I've worked on some shows through the years that were, let's just say, less than smooth operations."

In the series, the actor is orbited by a colourful cast of characters, including Damon Herriman as local villain Lucky, Jennifer Nettles as Hub's country singer ex Maryanne, and Beth Grant as his devoutly Christian mum, Kitty. If you only know the 75-year-old Grant from her roles in *The Mindy Project* and *Donnie Darko*, prepare yourself for a revelatory turn in *The Bondsman*.

"The mother/son relationship between Kitty and Hub I hadn't seen before on screen,"

> **"I had finally made it in Hollywood when I got texted a Kevin Bacon meme by Kevin Bacon"**

Oleson says about the series' central pairing. "I wanted to make Kitty a former bounty hunter herself, and give us the ability to send her out into the field.

"Beth was just hopping up and down with delight, saying, 'Roles like this aren't usually created for women in Hollywood!' She was so excited for the opportunity."

Oleson says he can't talk about season two but confirms he does have plans should Amazon okay a second run. For the moment, though, he's just excited for audiences to feast their eyes on this gleefully bonkers show.

"Kevin Bacon in a deal with the Devil hunting demons – hey, come on!" he laughs. "What's that quote from the Super Bowl [Uber Eats advert]? 'Everybody loves bacon'.

"Put him in a deal with the Devil where the only way he can get out of it is to hunt down escaped demons from the prison of Hell, put a chainsaw and a shotgun in his hands and yeah, I'm in!"

The Bondsman is on Prime Video from 3 April.

SCI-FACT! **Beth Grant isn't the only *Donnie Darko* alum in the show – Jolene Purdy also appears as Hub's contact from Pot O' Gold.**

DEVELOPER EXCLUSIVE

Survival On Arrakis

Frank Herbert's work gets the videogame treatment with **Dune: Awakening**

WORDS: **JACK SHEPHERD**

DUNE: AWAKENING STARTS WITH a question: what if Paul Atreides was never born? There would be no Lisan al Gaib to lead the Fremen people; no one to stop House Harkonnen. Would the planet Arrakis fall? Would the messianic Kwisatz Haderach still come?

This is the alternative timeline in which *Dune: Awakening*, the upcoming massively multiplayer online (MMO) game, takes place. You play as an agent tasked by the Bene Gesserit to find the desert-dwelling Fremen, who have mysteriously disappeared. You must survive on Arrakis while House Atreides and House Harkonnen battle for control.

It's a bold choice to tell a new, divergent story in the *Dune* universe when Frank Herbert's tale is so beloved. "We are huge fans of the original works, but as games are a very different medium, we also want to expand on the original story," Ole Andreas Haley, the game's lead producer, tells Red Alert. "We felt the most fitting way to do this was by exploring an alternative timeline."

Survival is at the heart of *Dune: Awakening*. Funcom, the developer and publisher behind the game, has history in the genre, having previously released *Conan Exiles*, a survival game that also takes place on a desert planet. "Building on our past experiences of crafting MMOs and survival games, it was a great opportunity to bring this same kind of freedom and immersion to *Dune*," Haley says.

The *Dune* universe naturally lent itself to certain survival mechanics while allowing the team to utilise the larger-scale social and political side of *Dune*. Haley explains that one of the key design pillars was making sure every design fitted with the *Dune* aesthetic. A key game mechanic came from this: your character must harvest water, a rare resource on Arrakis.

"You start on your knees squeezing water out from plants, moving your way to harvest blood from your enemies, moving into more efficient ways to extract water through dew reaping and so on," Haley says.

"The dew reaper is such a unique and *Dune*-like mechanic, where you have to go out just before the break of dawn when the moisture levels in the dew fields are at their highest and use the dew reaper to harvest precious water before it evaporates in the sun. There is something unique and serene about those moments."

Title screen art for the forthcoming game.

Prepare and pilot your own vehicles (eventually).

How to deal with worms? Run away, quickly.

It's these sorts of systems and mechanics that make *Dune: Awakening* stand out among the plethora of other survival games vying for your attention. "Something like using the [laser gun] cutteray to analyse fracture lines on a rock to get an optimal harvest, or heading out with your literjon and dew reaper just before dawn to harvest fresh water, those offer a new take on survival," Haley says.

"As you progress and start dipping your toes in politics and the Landsraad, *Dune: Awakening* can expand on what a survival game can offer, which we hope can create really interesting guild vs guild and faction vs faction gameplay, fighting over control of Arrakis."

Although the developers have forged a new art direction for the game, Denis Villeneuve's movies have influenced certain designs. The team worked with the studio Legendary, visiting film sets and sharing artwork back and forth.

"We have also found inspirations from the older *Dune* movie adaptations like [those by] David Lynch and Alejandro Jodorowsky, which you might recognise in some places in the game," Haley says.

There are multiple biomes in *Dune: Awakening* that are not simple desert, with different areas – and there are many, many maps – which have different vibes to them. Haley adds that they are going to introduce more variety and locations as the game continues to develop post-launch.

Of course, this would not be *Dune* without the series' most iconic creatures, the sandworms. "Bringing the sandworms to life has been a fun and challenging experience," Haley says. "We very early on decided that we wanted them to feel alive and not as just scripted events. That's why they roam around on the map, within their respective territories, with their own form of AI driving them.

> **"The dew reaper is such a unique and Dune-like mechanic"**

"This also allows us to give them different aggressions and personalities in different areas of the map. It was also important for us that they consistently are a true threat on Arrakis, which means that there is no way to kill them, and if you get eaten by a sandworm it is one of the few ways where you lose everything you have on your character as you respawn."

As for riding them... "Sandworm riding is not something that will be in the game at launch," Haley says, "but this is something that we want to introduce at some point in the future."

Dune: Awakening releases on PC on 20 May.

SCI-FACT! **Funcom also developed and published *Anarchy Online*, the first science fiction MMO RPG game.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- No Prime To Die... EON Productions ceding creative control of **James Bond** to Amazon MGM Studios.
- **Bong Joon Ho**'s next is a horror thriller set in the Seoul subway.
- Will Smith developing sequel to 2008's **Hancock**, with Zendaya up for a role.
- **Joseph Kosinski** to direct a UFO movie, produced by Jerry Bruckheimer.
- Steven Spielberg's own UFO movie now going by the title **Disclosure**.
- *Eden Lake*'s James Watkins to direct DC's **Clayface**.
- Jack O'Connell joining **Godzilla x Kong 3**.
- Remake of 1997's **Starship Troopers** rumoured to be in development.
- Daniel Craig no longer in the frame for Luca Guadagnino's **Sgt Rock**.
- Tatiana Maslany stars in **Keeper**, the next horror from Osgood Perkins.
- **Magic: The Gathering** set for the big-screen treatment from Legendary.
- Joe Wright directing AI thriller **Alignment**.
- New **Hunger Games** movie *Sunrise On The Reaping* arrives 20 November 2026. (Assuming we're not doing it for real.)

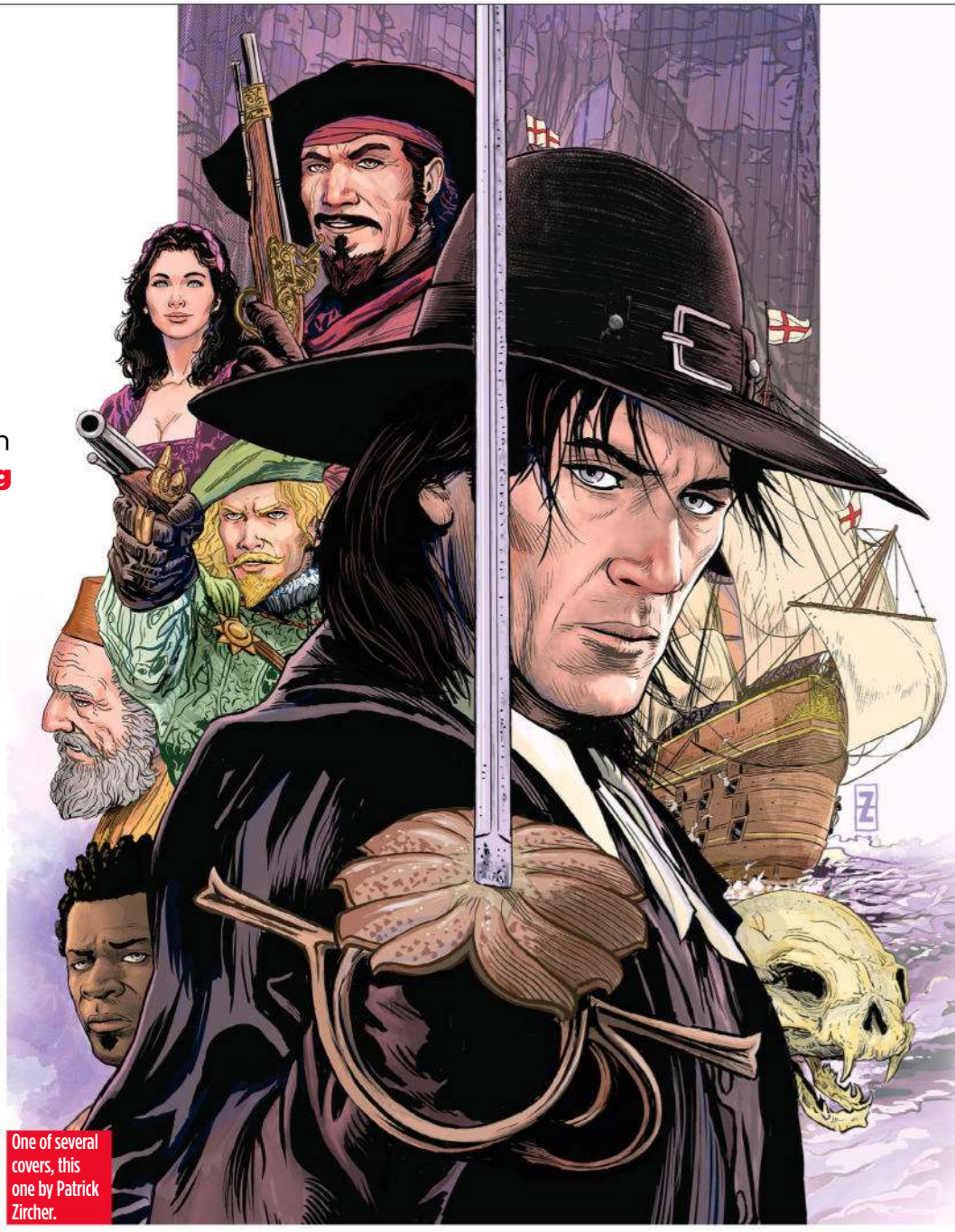
ARNOLD JEROCKI/GETTY FOR LVMH X VOGUE X NBC

SCI-FACT! **Solomon Kane made his comics debut in "Skulls In The Stars", published in 1973's *Monsters Unleashed!* issue one.**

CREATOR EXCLUSIVE

Snakes Alive!

Patrick Zircher's new Solomon Kane series **The Serpent Ring** paves the way for this year's Conan epic WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**



One of several covers, this one by Patrick Zircher.

AFTER BRINGING BACK SOLOMON Kane in the pages of Titan Comics and Heroic Signatures' *The Savage Sword Of Conan* anthology, writer/artist Patrick "Patch" Zircher is now spinning off Robert E Howard's Puritan warrior into four-issue miniseries *The Serpent Ring*. It also leads into this year's Conan crossover, called *Scourge Of The Serpent*.

"I love the character and there are so many stories to tell," says Zircher, who is attracted to his singular nature. "Several things intrigue me about Kane," he continues. "Foremost that he's a lone wanderer in the way a knight, a ronin, a western hero and many great mythical characters are. There's an allure to that kind of freedom and independence.

"I'm also interested in his faith and how the supernatural tests it, and I'm fascinated by his world, which blends Howardian and Lovecraftian mythology with the 16th and 17th century – an era of musketeers, explorers, witches and pirates."

Beginning on the Barbary Coast, Kane's quest to track down the fabled Serpent Ring of Set takes him across the globe. "From Naples, Venice and the Gold Coast of Africa, he covers thousands of miles in this adventure, by land and sea," says Zircher. "Howard alluded to Kane having been to Africa before the first of his adventures there and I wanted to explore that."

Kane's opponents the Serpent Ring and the Serpent Men first appeared in Howard's 1929 King Kull short story "The Shadow Kingdom". "The ring's most famous bearer is Thoth-Amon, the Stygian wizard from Conan's era," continues Zircher. "The millennium-spanning mythos of the ring and the Serpent Men – the latter are even included in HP Lovecraft's tales – makes it a perfect showcase for Howard's heroes."

Kane assembles a diverse band of brigands around him. "They represent a wide range of personalities from Kane's time," says Zircher. "There's a renegade Knight of the Order of Malta, a beautiful young Venetian woman, an old Kabbalist, a suave Neapolitan rogue and a Jesuit missionary and his African initiate. Though together they have different dreams and desires, trust is an issue. You'll also catch sight of four of Howard's own creations."

After the moody black and white artwork of his *Savage Sword* stories, Zircher is enjoying the larger expanse afforded to him by colour. "It has allowed me to demonstrate how singular Solomon Kane appears in this adventure," he says. "Whether fighting on the deck of a Portuguese caravel or stalking the African savannah, he's a striking figure in his black Puritan garb and rapier, and colour also allows for a lot of storytelling choices regarding mood and place.

"He's a character many of my art heroes have drawn at one time or another," he adds, citing Jeffrey Catherine Jones as a particular favourite. "If that interpretation were to Solomon Kane what Frank Frazetta is to Conan, I would be particularly happy with that."

Solomon Kane: The Serpent Ring is out on 26 March.

Covers by Joseph Michael Linsner and Robert Hack.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Road Warriors

Hit the road as **Wacky Races** returns for a new comic series

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE *WACKY RACES* dates back to 1968, Ivan Cohen is emulating some more recent futuristic Road Warriors as he and artist Mariano Benitez Chapo update Hanna-Barbera's cartoon car competition in *Giant-Size Wacky Races* – a new one-shot for Dynamite Entertainment's Warner Animation line.

"Part of what made this a challenge worth facing was thinking about how to make it a 21st century story and bringing something new to the mix," Cohen tells Red Alert. "So there are new racers, new vehicles and a new context for what the races mean to the non-racers.

"Penelope Pitstop is the main character, and our take on her is part classic *Wacky Races* and a little bit *Furiosa*. She's not a lone driver in a hellish apocalypse but she's incredibly charismatic and puts everything on the line to achieve her goals, which are more than just winning races – though she's really into winning races, for sure!"

While *Mad Max* "offered some road race parallels", Cohen was also inspired by the brutal ultra-violence of 1975's *Rollerball*. "The idea of a high-stakes sport in a world just a little ahead of our time, where the spectacle takes people's minds off of their own troubles, really resonated," he adds. "Turning the *Wacky Races* cars and racers into a cross between NASCAR and professional wrestling helped me find new ways in."

Described by Cohen as "a former racer who has gone a little corporate", Penelope's main rival is gentleman racer Peter Perfect, while Dick Dastardly and Muttley still provide the villainy. "Peter is like the Rock crossed with [WWE co-founder] Vince McMahon, a superstar who became owner of the league," says Cohen.

"He sees a big opportunity in exploiting Penelope's talents and her backstory, a decision that doesn't sit well with other racers like Dick and Muttley, who are some of the best established 'heels' in the Races. We also introduce some new racers, inspired by the idea that modern racers would reflect NASCAR-type sponsors. So there's a car brought to you by Big Pharma, another by a computer company's line of retail stores and one sponsored by an Ikea-type chain, whose driver Allen Wrench has an immediate connection to Penelope, so I'm hoping to get back to him in future stories."

While Cohen teases "the final race winds up in Washington DC for reasons that are... well, that would be telling, but 'wacky' is a great adjective", the 48-pager includes several races, encompassing various locales.

"Doing this as a one-shot gave us room to tell a big story in one chunk with lots of racers and a ton of world-building," he says. "It's a complete story, although we also set up a lot of potential stories, so I'd love to explore further. We raise the very real possibility that Muttley isn't actually a dog but a racer in a costume!"

Giant-Size Wacky Races is out on 9 April.

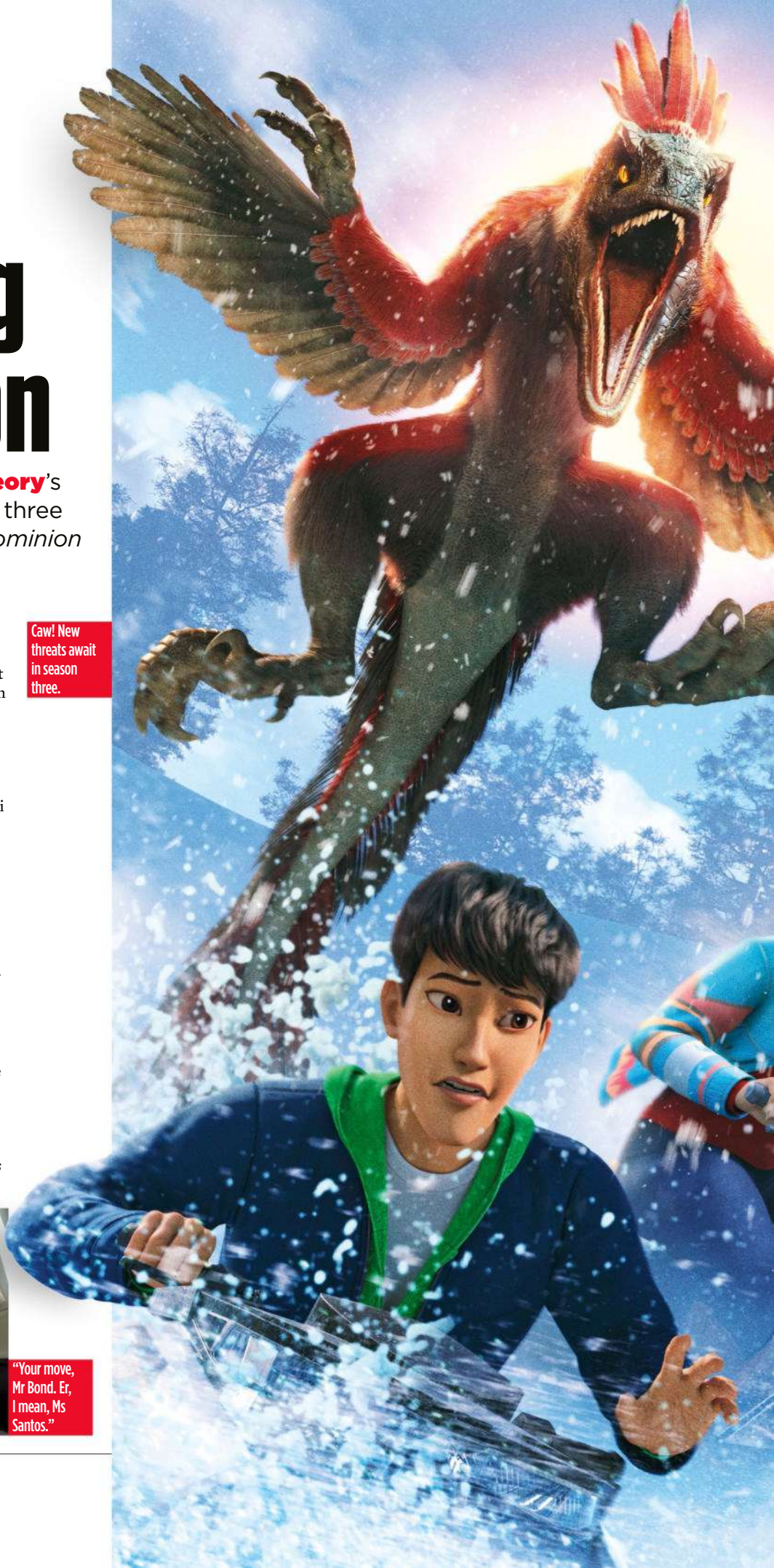
SCI-FACT! **Ken Pontac and Leonardo Manco's *Wacky Raceland* (2016) was also set in a *Mad Max*-esque future.**

SHOWRUNNER EXCLUSIVE

Claiming Dominion

Jurassic World: Chaos Theory's showrunner on how season three enhances *Jurassic World Dominion*

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**



Caw! New threats await in season three.

WHETHER YOU LIKED THE *Jurassic World* film trilogy or not, there's no question that one of the best things to come out of its extension of the canon are the characters and storylines of DreamWorks Animation's series *Camp Cretaceous* – and its sequel *Jurassic World: Chaos Theory*.

The former introduced a group of teen campers – Darius (Paul-Mikél Williams), Kenji (Darren Barnet), Ben (Sean Giambrone), Yaz (Kausar Mohammed), Sammy (Raini Rodriguez) and Brooklynn (Kiersten Kelly) – who came to be known as "The Nublar Six" when they survived the dinosaur mayhem and volcanic destruction of Isla Nublar.

In the latter, the six are now young twentysomethings traversing the globe to uncover the origins of a black market dinosaur smuggling operation with direct ties to the events in *Jurassic World Dominion*.

Season three picks right up from the emotional gut-punch of a cliffhanger that had Brooklynn (presumed dead) revealing that she was in fact alive to most of her friends, then choosing to leave them and ally herself with the Broker, aka Soyona Santos (Dichen Lachman) from *Dominion*.

"It's funny – whereas with *Camp Cretaceous* we started alongside the movie and then we

"Your move, Mr Bond. Er, I mean, Ms Santos."

Darius, Kenji, Ben, Sammy and Yaz: mixed emotions.

"I don't wanna fight." "Me neither... let's not."

were able to kind of broaden out and do our own thing, this is almost the inverse, where we started doing our own thing, and then we're syncing up with the timeline with *Dominion*," co-creator and showrunner Scott Kreamer tells Red Alert. "They just found out Brooklynn's alive, and Brooklynn had a chance to go with them, and she didn't. We just wanted to get right in on that because that's a lot of raw emotion, and that's a lot of people having different feelings about what's just happened."

If season one was a noir thriller and season two was a global adventure, Kreamer says season three is more complex and less easily distilled. "We really lean into the emotions of the characters more this season, yet we're still butting up against *Dominion*," he teases. "There's some action movie stuff in this to go along with *Dominion*. There's a lot of stuff going on, a lot of great character stuff and some really fun action with it too. This season's a ride, and we cover a lot of ground."

> **"We really wanted to start everybody unsettled"**

As for what to expect from the once again bifurcated "Nublar Six", Kreamer says there's going to be a lot of messy personal growth happening. "One of the things about working with a great head writer in Bethany Armstrong Johnson is that we do want to hit not only the growth, but also see these characters where we haven't seen them before. We want to earn everything.

"There is the Brooklynn of it all," he continues. "Yeah, she's out there to bring Santos down, but there's something inside her that is drawn towards this darkness. With all the decisions that she's made, and even manipulating her own friends, seeing that inner turmoil with Brooklynn, that's exciting. But also seeing how Sammy is internalising this whole thing. Kenji has been betrayed by Brooklynn, but he's also been betrayed by Ben. Brooklynn's put Ben in a rough spot. Yaz has her own feelings and is not necessarily on the same page with Sammy. We saw them not necessarily on the same page in season one.

"Then, we did a lot more in *Camp Cretaceous*, leaning into Darius being the youngest and maybe the most naive, or least experienced. We're feeling that this season too, whereas I don't know if Darius really knows what to think. When you think about where we started him at the beginning of season one, everything is upside down for him right now. So we really wanted to start everybody unsettled, personally and interpersonally."

And what about the dinosaurs? As revealed in the season three trailer, there will be species seen in the films like Stygimoloch and Pyroraptor, and this show's inclusion of a Kentrosaurus. Also look for the return of the chilling enforcer of the Broker known as the Handler (Sumalee Montano) who has whistle-trained her Atrociraptors.

There will also be some major dino set-pieces that are unlike anything they've done before in either animated series. "We really put the team through it on this one," Kreamer says. "There are so many things that I see [from them] and it's like, 'Wow, we would have not been able to do that on *Camp Cretaceous*,' in technology or experience.

"We took some big swings, especially as the season gets going and starts moving along. There's some great stuff coming that I'm excited for people to see."

Jurassic World: Chaos Theory is on Netflix from 3 April.

SCI-FACT! ***Severance*** **actor Dichen Lachman is back to voice** ***Jurassic World Dominion*** **character Soyona Santos.**

NEWS WARP

HIGH-SPEED INFORMATION

- Akiva Goldsman developing new TV takes on Irwin Allen's **The Time Tunnel**, **Land Of The Giants** and **Voyage To The Bottom Of The Sea**.
- *Scream*'s Matthew Lillard joining the second season of **Daredevil: Born Again**.
- Naveen Andrews stars in podcast drama **Star Trek: Khan**.
- **The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power** renewed for a third season.
- New live-action show **The Forgotten Realms** to expand the *Dungeons & Dragons* universe.
- Jared Padalecki and Misha Collins guest star in **The Boys** season five.
- **The Punisher** gets his own Disney+ one shot, starring and co-written by Jon Bernthal.
- Kid-friendly animated shows **Starfire**, **My Adventures With Green Lantern** and **DC Super Powers** on their way.
- Jeremy Strong leads Netflix version of clone thriller **The Boys From Brazil**.
- *Avatar: The Last Airbender* to get spin-off **Avatar: Seven Havens**.
- **Paradise** renewed for a second season. Heavenly.

AMY SUSSMAN/STAFF/GETTY

(L) One of the variant covers, by Jahnoy Lindsay.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Strange New Worlds

Jo Mullein ventures beyond the Far Sector in Al Ewing's **Absolute Green Lantern**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

WHILE *Metamorpho*, Al Ewing's other current DC Comics series, is quirky fun, *Absolute Green Lantern* is the complete opposite. Illustrated by Jahnoy Lindsay, it's pitched as "a religious horror comic", comparable in tone to Ewing's *Immortal Hulk*.

"They really are completely different books," Ewing tells Red Alert. "*Metamorpho* is a love letter to a certain type of 1960s comic while *Absolute Green Lantern* is a much darker story oriented around the unknowability of cosmic forces. The only real similarity is that they're both modern takes on older concepts."

As with the other *Absolute* titles, Ewing has radically reinvented the classic Green Lantern concept. "That isn't to say there won't be things long-time Green Lantern readers notice," he continues. "Something I said a lot at the pitching stage was that I was interested in 'the familiar made strange, the strange made familiar'. It's about rhyming with the regular Green Lantern mythos rather than directly referencing it."

Rather than well-known members of the Corp such as Hal Jordan, John Stewart or Guy Gardner, Ewing is focusing on Jo "Sojourner" Mullein, who was introduced by NK Jemisin and Jamal Campbell in 2019's *Far Sector*. "I picked Jo because I liked the character and because she's the Green Lantern associated with dealing with alien cultures," he explains, "and part of the point of *Absolute* is dealing with the Green Lantern as the expression of a completely alien culture that humans absolutely do not understand.

"It'll be interesting seeing how our Jo is different from the Sojourner of the regular universe – she's rougher-edged and less together, even down to the visuals where she's missing those signature glasses with the sharp edges. She's more unstructured, more chaotic and definitely more secretive – we'll be finding things out about her past right up until the end of the first arc."

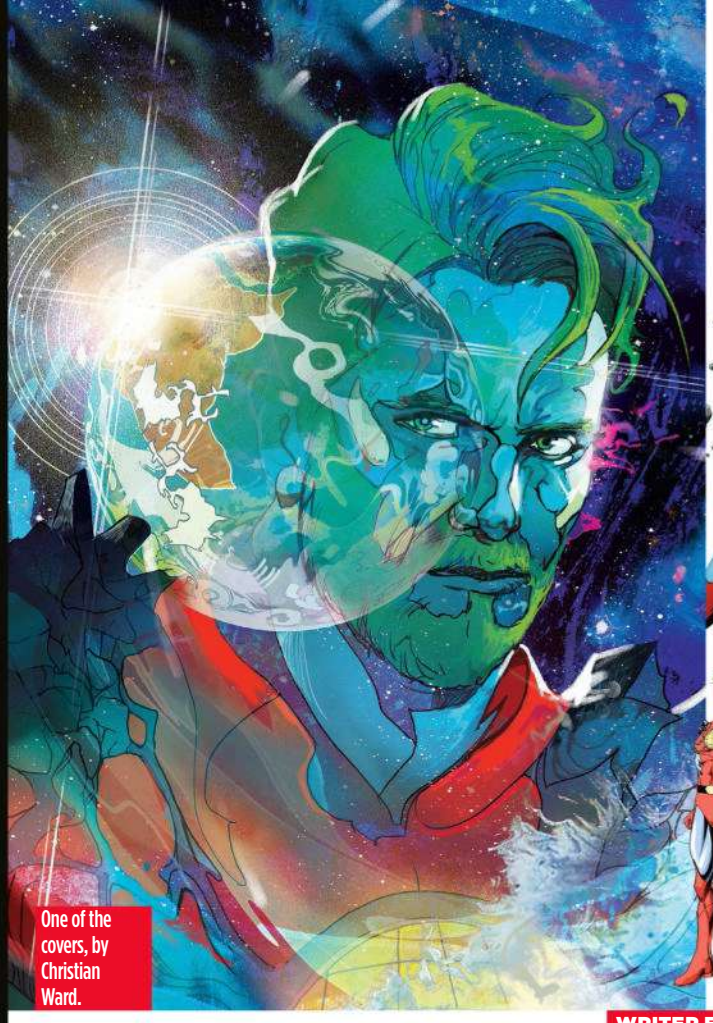
Ewing teases that "the giant object that falls from space is the Green Lantern, and that's about the only information anybody gets about it", and that Jo is on her own with no ring or Green Lantern Corps to support her. "What is the Green Lantern? What's the green power? What is the Abin Sur?" he adds. "Nobody knows, nobody is told.

"The readers are going to have to piece these things together – trying to forget what they know from the main universe – as the characters do. What I will say is that in addition to the ordinary people who come across this object, there are more powerful people who want the Green Lantern for themselves."

Absolute Green Lantern has only a few links with *Absolute Batman*, *Wonder Woman* and *Superman*, which have now been joined by *Absolute Flash* and *Martian Manhunter*. "We're keeping things separate to begin with, to make sure these books can stand on their own," says Ewing. "But I've been chatting with the other writers and there are definitely things that connect."

Absolute Green Lantern is out on 2 April.

SCI-FACT! **Abin Sur is the late Green Lantern who bequeathed his ring to Hal Jordan after falling to Earth in 1959's *Showcase* issue 22.**



One of the covers, by Christian Ward.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Going Green

Dynamite Entertainment's new **Captain Planet** is all about the environment

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

DESCRIBING IT AS "*X-Men* meets *Avatar: The Last Airbender*", David Pepose has long wanted to relaunch *Captain Planet*, believing that it is all too relevant for current times. Now after scripting fellow Hanna-Barbera animation *Space Ghost* last year, he's introducing the Planeteers to Dynamite Entertainment's Warner Animation line.

"Like many '90s children, I grew up watching *Captain Planet*, but it wasn't until I was an adult that I realised the sheer potential behind the concept, as it's inherently multicultural and diverse in such a truly organic way that we haven't seen since the days of *Giant-Sized X-Men*," he says, referring to 1975's classic debut of the New X-Men.

"It tackles the pressing issues of our modern era, including environmental disasters and the human greed and corruption that fuels them, and it also has the potential for incredible action choreography and sprawling mythology across millennia. It's a brand new continuity for newcomers and diehard fans alike, an origin story that roots Captain Planet and the Planeteers firmly in the 21st century."

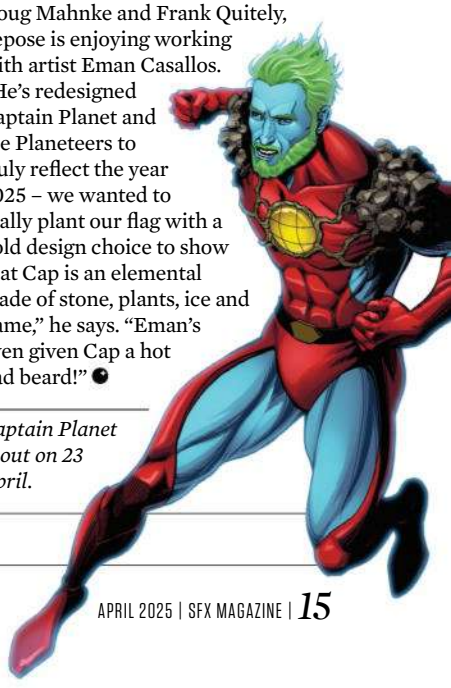
Pepose has drawn on the original 1990 cartoon – centring on five special young people who are brought together by Earth spirit Gaia, who can combine their powers to summon Captain Planet – while also updating numerous aspects. "I'm leaning into the many ways the world has changed since, and we've worked hard to make sure every character reflects the world we live in today," he continues.

"All five members of our core cast come from very different places and viewpoints and they've all got strong personalities, which leads to some unexpected conflicts as well as some surprising pairings. The Planeteers each wield and embody one of the five elements, which means that sparks are going to fly when they first meet, and some punches are thrown before they fall in line as a functioning team."

After Gaia is kidnapped, the Planeteers are pitted against ruthless oligarch Lucian Plunder. "Or 'Lootin' Plunder,' as his critics call him," laughs Pepose, alluding to his name in the animated series. "In a world where billionaires like Elon Musk are effectively running the American government, Plunder's the kind of corrupt villain that is only getting timelier by the minute. He's got nearly unlimited wealth under his control, which means he's got an army of mercenaries at his command, including Argos Bleak and Duke Nukem as well as some other world-shaking threats we're not quite ready to reveal yet. Suffice to say, the Planeteers will immediately find themselves on the back foot thanks to Plunder and company, so if they can't figure out how to work together as a team, Gaia and the rest of the world might not survive."

Comparing him to Steve Dillon, Doug Mahnke and Frank Quitely, Pepose is enjoying working with artist Eman Casallos. "He's redesigned Captain Planet and the Planeteers to truly reflect the year 2025 – we wanted to really plant our flag with a bold design choice to show that Cap is an elemental made of stone, plants, ice and flame," he says. "Eman's even given Cap a hot dad beard!"

Captain Planet is out on 23 April.

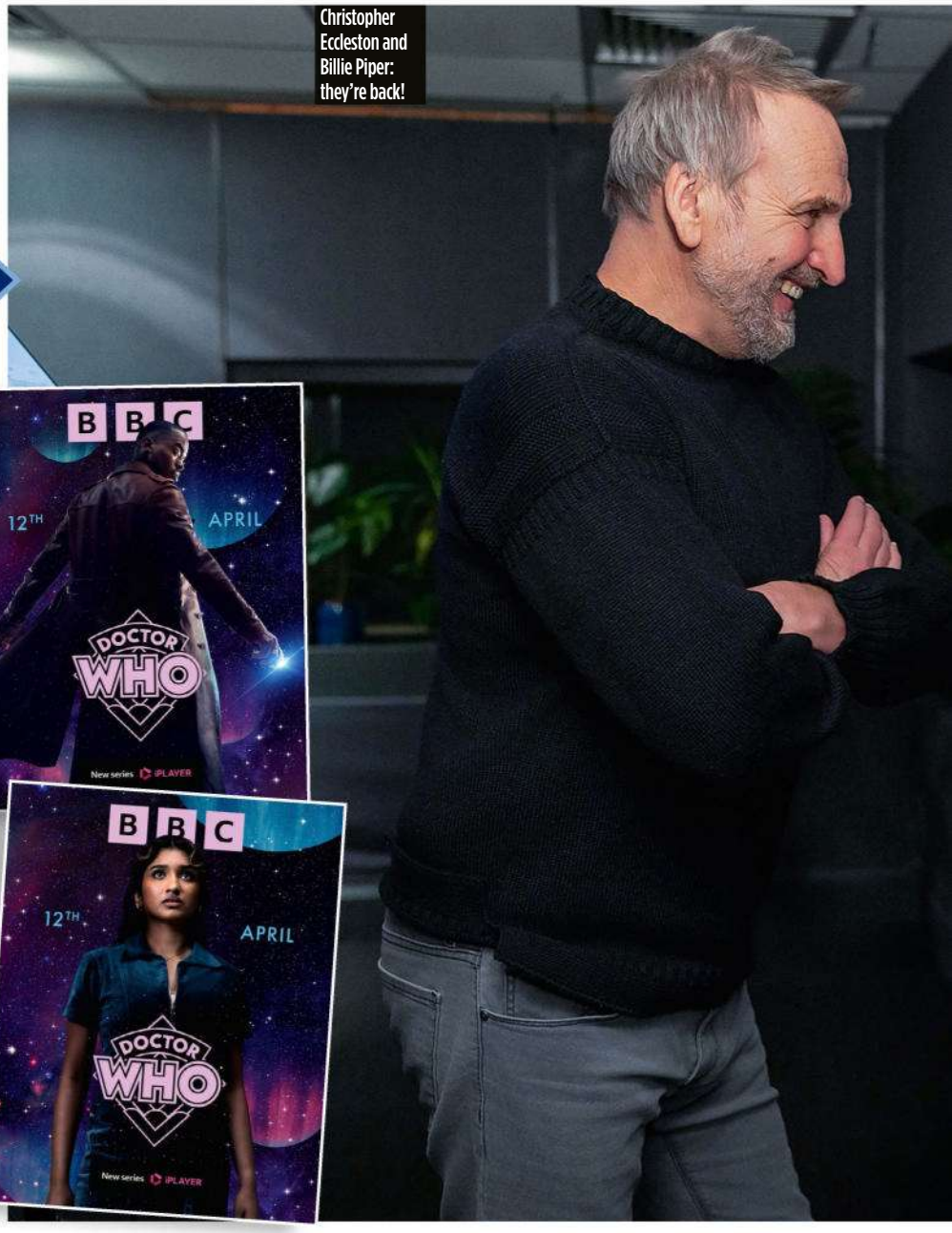


SCI-FACT! ***Captain Planet*** **is published on this year's Earth Day and will be printed on 70% recycled paper.**

SCI-FACT! The BBC Radiophonic Workshop created the materialisation sound of the TARDIS by scraping a key down a piano string.

SFX SPACE AND TIME

NEWS FROM THE WORLD OF DOCTOR WHO



Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper: they're back!

Season two of *Doctor Who* has been confirmed as returning to BBC One, iPlayer and Disney+ weekly from 12 April. The iPlayer release has been changed from midnight to 8.00am.

Additional cast have been announced for season two, including Christopher Chung. He said: "I'm absolutely thrilled to step into the Whoniverse as Cassio for season two! This show is legendary, and getting to be part of this new era feels surreal. Working with Russell and Ncuti has been a dream! This episode is huge – packed with everything *Who* fans love: heart, adventure, and a touch of madness. I can't wait for everyone to see what's in store – it's going to be iconic. Get ready!"

Showrunner Russell T Davies added: "I'm a huge fan of *Slow Horses*, and I was so excited to get Chris involved. He brings all of his strength and style and talent to one of the darkest, toughest episodes we've ever made. As for whether Cassio is an ally or an enemy of the Doctor, you'll have to wait and see, but I can promise, it's one hell of a meeting!"

Freddie Fox will play "a fearsome villain from another planet". Fox said: "I had the most amazing time making this show and feel honoured to have been asked to be a part of Russell's crazy, bonkers, beautiful vision. Added to which, sharing space with the iconic Doctor that is Ncuti Gatwa was special beyond imagining. If audiences enjoy watching it half as much as I did making it, televisions are on course to explode right across the world!"

Alan Cumming also guest stars, voicing animated character Mr Ring-a-Ding. Davies said: "Only Alan Cumming could give a runaway cartoon so much wit, malice, danger and fun. He makes the whole universe of *Doctor Who* wilder and madder than ever, and it's an absolute honour to welcome him on board the TARDIS."

Presenter Rylan Clark will appear as himself, hosting The Interstellar Song Contest. He said: "As a massive Whovian, getting the call to be in *Doctor Who* was a call I've always dreamed of getting. The episode is all my favourite things about the show with an added song contest set in space. It really is a dream come true. I can't wait for everyone to see it."

Other guest stars spotted in the recently released trailer include Caoilfhionn Dunne, Evelyn Miller, Ariyon Bakare, Julie Dray and Jonah Hauer-King.

Miller said: "I'm so delighted to be joining the *Doctor Who* team. It was such a feature of my childhood, the memory of curling up on the sofa with my brother and watching the Weeping Angels episode from behind a pillow still makes me laugh. We were terrified. The love and passion that's gone into this series is so clear. I can't wait for people to see it!"

Bakare (previously in "The Woman Who Lived") said: "As a kid, I'd run around the house chasing my little sister, arms raised, shouting, 'I am a Dalek!' Back then, I never imagined I'd even meet a Doctor, let alone guest star in the show. So returning to the Whoniverse for season two is an absolute treat. I can't wait for everyone to see what we've created."

Dunne said: "I am so grateful to have been asked to be a part of this exciting second season of *Doctor Who*. As a long-time fan of the show, it has been a dream come true.

"And to get to work with such an amazing

***Fourth Doctor Adventures: The Ruins of Kaerula* (June) and *The Fugitive Doctor: Dead Or Alive* (July).**

◆ *The War Doctor Rises: Fallen Heroes* releases in May. Angela Bruce returns as Brigadier Winifred Bambera in two new box sets, *UNIT – Brave New World: Fractures* (June) and *Knightfall* (March 2026). Jon Culshaw reads *Mirror Matter* by Kate Orman, a brand-new audio novel starring the Third Doctor and his season seven team, out in July. *The Third Doctor Adventures: Operation Vengeance* releases in October.

◆ **Covers for the Fifteenth Doctor/Belinda novels *Fear Death By Water* and *Spectral Scream* have been released.**

◆ *Doctor Who* will be represented at Record Store Day, with Demon Records releasing "The Tenth Planet" on 12 April. The double LP features the soundtrack of the original TV episodes on 140g white and silver vinyl.

◆ **The *Doctor Who* x Propstore *Children In Need* auction raised £245,243 for the charity, with over 2,000 people taking part.**

◆ The BBC Radiophonic Workshop archive has been made available for the first time for use by musical artists and producers, in collaboration with Spitfire Audio and BBC Studios. Visit spitfireaudio.com.

◆ **Character Options have announced the first of five special action figures available exclusively online. The Third Doctor and sonic screwdriver includes a new headsculpt of Jon Pertwee and a costume from "The Daemons". It comes with a newly designed sonic screwdriver with an updated sound chip.**

One of the props from the charity auction.

Doctor Who is on BBC One, BBC iPlayer (UK) and Disney+ (globally) from 12 April.

gang, Ncuti and Varada, such a wonderful duo, this absolutely stellar cast and such a supportive and hardworking crew. I couldn't have asked for a better gang of folk to have hurtled through the Whoniverse with."

Dray said: "I am so excited to be joining the cast of *Doctor Who*, an iconic show with such a rich legacy. I had such an amazing time working alongside Rylan while wearing some beautiful prosthetics, and can't wait for audiences to see the spectacular *Interstellar Song Contest* be brought to life! Voilà!"

◆ **Choreographer Jack Murphy commented on Instagram that he had returned to season two to choreograph new dances.**

◆ Big Finish has announced that Christopher Eccleston and Billie Piper will reunite for a full 12-episode audio season to be released later this year.

◆ **Also incoming from Big Finish: three-story box sets *The Sixth Doctor Adventures: The Cosmos And Mrs Clarke* (May), *The***

Jon Culshaw (right) and the cast of *Mirror Matter*.

Get stuck in to the BBC Radiophonic Workshop archive.

SCI-FACT! Vatican City has a total area of just 49 hectares (121 acres). It became independent from Italy in 1929.

WRITER EXCLUSIVE

Holy Blood

It's *Conclave* with vampires in Mark Millar's new series **Vatican City**

WORDS: **STEPHEN JEWELL**

One of the covers, this one by Per Berg.

AFTER BLENDING VAMPIRES with superheroes in *Night Club*, Mark Millar is now combining bloodsuckers with siege films in *Vatican City*. Illustrated by Per Berg, the three-parter grew out of a subplot in Millar's family saga *The Magic Order*.

"It was just three pages about this library in the Vatican that's full of unpublished books," Millar tells Red Alert. "I thought, 'This is too cool to not tell'. It's essentially *Assault On Precinct 13* with vampires – the world's been taken over by vampires and the last outpost being the Vatican. It's the kind of movie that would have been made in the '70s if the studios had lost their minds!"

While there's no specific connection, *Vatican City* explores similar themes to Millar's 1989 debut *Saviour* and 2009's *American Jesus*.

"I just like writing positive things about religion," he says. "*American Jesus* is about this technocratic state where the tech bros are trying to microchip the human population and enslave everybody in the global beast system, so Jesus comes back and sorts it out.

"With this, I like the idea that the world's gone to hell and the one place you can seek sanctuary is behind the walls of Vatican City. Being a Catholic, I've got an unusual 180 on religion from most other writers, so I always try and write something nice about it."

As a self-governing city state within Rome, the Vatican makes for a unique and unusual location. "The idea of a country within a country is fascinating," continues Millar. "It's got its own police force and its own laws, which are separate from the host country that it's living inside of, and it's got its own army, weapons systems and ambassadors. It's not like setting a story in Chicago, Philadelphia or New York.

"What makes it really cool are the visuals, right down to the Elite Guard, the Vatican's army, some of the most highly trained soldiers in the world. They have this incredible medieval dress that they still wear, so the idea of vampires vs the Swiss Guard is really cool."

Like last year's Millarworld crossover *Big Game*, it boasts its own secret histories, although *Vatican City* isn't Millar's answer to *The Da Vinci Code*. "It's more of a straight-up 'We've got 96 hours to stay alive' kind of thing," explains Millar. "There's a real ticking clock aspect to it where the vampires have taken over the Western world and there's 2,000 people holed up in the Vatican.

"There's a certain amount of weapons and these guys are just trying to stay alive. The vampires are lobbing grenades in there and sending in human slaves to kill them. It's very much a kinetic story. There's an intellectual element underpinning it but it's very much got a John Carpenter late-'70s movie vibe, where there's some nice people holed up in this place and the bad people are trying to get in."

Vatican City is out on 9 April.

ATSUSHI NISHIJIMA/NETFLIX

Winona Ryder (Joyce) and Cara Buono (Karen Wheeler) on set.

COUNTDOWN TO STRANGER THINGS 5

The Byers house in Lenora, California from season four was recently put up for sale. The four-bed property in Albuquerque, New Mexico, was listed for $675,000.

Sadie Sink's post-apocalyptic rock opera *O'Dessa* is now available on Disney+.

Tales From Hawkins 2, a four-issue comic book series, is due to be released by Dark Horse Comics on 25 June. Each issue will feature spooky tales featuring characters from the series.

Stage show *The First Shadow* is due to open on Broadway as this issue of *SFX* goes on sale and the team have shared images of the cast online, as well as continuing their countdown showing the Mind Flayer looming over New York.

Speaking at the recent SCAD TVfest, Matt Duffer said about working on season five: "Ross and I do love longer films. We love the special effects sequences, but at the end of the day, obviously, it's about the character work. And then what I do love about television, even though we were film guys growing up, is I like we're able to do these huge cinematic special effects, extravaganza sequences.

"But then we also have a lot of time to spend with the characters, so when they get into the situations that involve the special effects, you deeply care about what's going to happen to them. You don't tune out. So often you find yourself tuning out, or I do, in some of these sequences [in blockbusters]. The goal is you're so invested in the story, and that's what I found good TV does."

Also at SCAD TVfest, Matt commented on how the actors have grown up into adults, revealing that flashbacks will feature in season five: "They are, yes! You kind of forget it until you look back at season one or you're gonna put in a flashback and you're like, 'Oh my god. They're tiny little guys.'

"But it's like family now. We've grown up with them. That aspect of the show has been really special, and I don't know if it's just because there's a bunch of them, but they've all turned out so well as human beings, because the fear is we're going to screw up a child by making them famous, and I'm just so proud of how they've turned out as people."

Iconic costumes from season four were recently auctioned for LA Wildfire Relief, marking the first time production has ever released any items for sale. Bidding ran until 21 February, with the five lots – including Joyce Byers's puffer jacket, a Hellfire Club T-shirt and three different Hawkins High School items – making over $19,000.

Jamie Campbell Bower (Vecna) has joined the cast of *The Lord Of The Rings: The Rings Of Power* on Prime Video. Speaking at MegaCon Orlando he said: "I just don't think I'll be doing another bad guy for a minute. Like, it f–ks me up. I'm dead serious."

Speaking about being part of *Stranger Things* he said: "It's been amazing, and it's been an incredible journey, to join the show from season four, to be part of something that so many people love and something that I loved as well and still love. But I definitely am ready to hang up the foam latex."

Millie Bobby Brown has been promoting her new Netflix movie *The Electric State*, and has inevitably been asked about *Stranger Things*. "Be patient. Let the Duffers create what they've been doing for the last 10 years so beautifully. It is worth it, I promise," she told *People* at the premiere for the film.

She told our sister site, GamesRadar: "I will forever be attached to that show, and I'm proud of it. It's a lot of hard work that everyone's put into it. And I'll always be grateful for the Duffer Brothers for hiring me, and for Netflix for trusting me with such an amazing character. It's an amazing season. I hate gatekeeping all the information, so I'm really excited for everyone to enjoy it."

Stranger Things is on Netflix.

SCI-FACT! Jamie Campbell Bower previously appeared in the remake of *The Prisoner*, alongside Sir Ian McKellen.

DIRECTOR INTERVIEW

Hoodoo Blues

Black Panther director Ryan Coogler on venturing into horror with vampire tale **Sinners** WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

On making his first horror film...

It was my first time experimenting with the genre, head on. And I love it, man. I got to dig into the films that I loved coming up and got to analyse why I loved them and what drew me to them. I really leaned on those influences and figured out a way of how to tell my story in that space. It's kind of genre-bending. It's a genre-fluid film. There are vampires in the film, but it's really about a lot more than just that. It's one of many elements. I think we're gonna surprise people with it.

On using his own family history for inspiration...

It's very personal. My maternal grandfather is from Mississippi and my Uncle James, who passed away while I was finishing up *Creed*, is also from Mississippi. It was a place that I had never been. My maternal grandfather passed before I was born.

We grew up in a house that he built in Oakland, after he had moved to California. I was fortunate to have a really, really close relationship with my uncle James and the seed of it started with that relationship. He would listen to blues music all the time. He would only talk about Mississippi when he was listening to that music. He had a profound effect on my life, and I got a chance to dig into my own ancestral history with this film.

On exploring the meaning of "the Devil's music"...

The film deals with American blues music. If you know the story of Tommy Johnson and Robert Johnson, all of that is there; hoodoo culture led by all these concepts and ideas. When you think about the vampire as it exists, it's got an association and a counterpart in almost every culture. But it is the supernatural creature that's most associated with seduction, that's most associated with choice.

In that aspect is something that's very present with blues music, which was often called "the Devil's music". It was the contrast between a secular lifestyle and that, so the film is in conversation with all of those things. But the duality is always at the heart.

On working with composer Ludwig Göransson again...

His father is a guitarist and taught him. And his father was obsessed with the musicians from this era, from this region. We actually did the [Mississippi] Blues Trail when we were researching the film and doing some early location scouting, and his dad came along with us. We went to BB King's club in Indianola, Mississippi, and played on the stage of this club.

On Michael B Jordan playing twin brothers, Elijah and Elias...

Every neighbourhood I was from coming up, if you said, "Hey, man, where the twins at?" they were always kind of notorious and local celebrities. This is an exploration of that. It's unique in that they are identical twins, but they are two different people. It's not as simple as two sides of the same coin.

On what horror medium influenced the movie the most...

Truthfully, the biggest influences are not in the cinema. The novel *Salem's Lot* has a massive influence on the film. And then there's a real deep cut influence. My favourite thing ever made is *The Twilight Zone*. My favourite episode of that is an episode called "The Last

Michael B Jordan (Elijah) and Miles Caton (Sammy).

IMAGES © WARNER BROS, FLIXPIX/ALAMY. PORTRAIT: STEPHEN LOVEKIN/SHUTTERSTOCK

> **The movie was made to be seen with a crowd and with people that you don't know**

Rites Of Jeff Myrtlebank", so that's probably the biggest influences.

On reuniting with his creative dream team...

We went really hard to make sure that the only, quote, unquote make-believe in the film is supernatural. We wanted the world to be extremely tactile, the same way that we approached our other films. I'm back at it with my same team, essentially my production designer, Hannah Beachler. This film is some of her best work.

I worked with [costume designer] Ruth Carter again, who did both *Panther* films with me and did the great *Malcolm X*. And this is some of the most fantastic work I've ever seen her do in terms of bringing this time back. We worked with [make-up artist] Mike Fontaine, who's incredible. He did a film called *Green Room* which is also another influence on this film. I remember some of [his] effects, they weren't creature effects, but some of the effects made me look away.

On the experience of seeing scares...

The movie was made to be seen with a crowd and with people that you don't know. We got a chance to show it to a few people and it's already been really rewarding. I think that with horror films, specifically in black culture, we're known for talking to the screen, and this film was made for that!

Sinners is released on 18 April.

Elijah is set to face off against... something.

SCI-FACT! **Coogler is an executive producer on upcoming Marvel Television projects *Ironheart* and *Eyes Of Wakanda*.**

SCI-FACT! **Roberto Orci named the USS Kelvin's captain, Richard Robau, after his uncle, who introduced him to *Star Trek*.**

THE FINAL FRONTIER

ROBERTO ORCI 1973-2025

The blockbusting Trekkie

WORDS: **NICK SETCHFIELD**

"I HAVE always identified with Spock," confessed screenwriter and producer Roberto Orci, one half of a franchise-friendly creative partnership called "Hollywood's secret weapons" by *Forbes* magazine. "He's a legal alien who came from another planet and teamed up with an American, the way that I've teamed up with my friend Alex Kurtzman."

Roberto Orci (left) with Alex Kurtzman, in 2007.

Born in Mexico City, Orci devoured American pop culture as a kid, improving his English through an omnivorous diet of imported films and television. Moving to Texas at 10, he went on to study in Santa Monica, California, meeting future collaborator Kurtzman in film class. The pair bonded over a mutual appreciation of Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies, And Videotape*.

Orci and Kurtzman began their TV careers on *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*, as well as short-lived Bruce Campbell swashbuckler *Jack Of All Trades*. Early noughties espionage drama *Alias* brought them into the orbit of JJ Abrams, who subsequently signed them for 2006's equally spy-focused *Mission: Impossible III*. Together they went on to co-create the reality-hopping *Fringe*.

Michael Bay's *The Island* earned them their first big-screen credit in 2004. The pair went on to write *Transformers* (2007) and *Transformers: Revenge Of The Fallen* (2009), building their reputation as billion-dollar wordsmiths. Later movies include *Cowboys & Aliens* (2011) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2014).

Orci co-wrote 2009's *Star Trek*. A lifelong devotee of the franchise, he urged the use of a branching timeline, not only to preserve the original continuity but "to buy ourselves freedom to continue on and explore strange new worlds." He returned for 2013's *Star Trek Into Darkness*, and was set to direct a third film in the Kelvin universe – reportedly resurrecting William Shatner's Kirk – before a creative clash with the studio led to his exit.

Other projects included the rebooted *Hawaii Five-0* and TV's *Sleepy Hollow*.

MICHELLE TRACHTENBERG 1985-2025

American actress who played Dawn Summers in *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*.

PETER JASON 1944-2025

American actor who appeared in *Alien Nation* and seven John Carpenter films.

TCD/PROD.DB / ALAMY

NEW AUTHOR

MH AYINDE

MEET THE FUTURE WORLDS PRIZE WINNER BEHIND EPIC FANTASY *A SONG OF LEGENDS LOST*

Tell us about your protagonist.
→ It has several viewpoint characters. They include Temi, a commoner from the capital's slums, whose family gets drawn into a feud with a crime syndicate, and Jinao, a noble from a warrior clan, who is sent on a quest to hunt down a legendary monster.

How does magic work in this world?
→ There are two magic systems. The first is exclusive to the warrior clans (or is it?!), and allows them to summon ancestral spirits to fight in battle. The second involves a secret language only monks are permitted to use, which powers ancient relics called "techwork".

Do you have to do much research?
→ Because I wanted the Nine Lands to feel truly multicultural, and also because of the book's themes, I took inspiration from numerous precolonial cultures from our world. For that, and for some aspects of warfare, I did do a little research.

Are there any particular authors who inspire you?
→ I'm a huge NK Jemisin fan. I also love Evan Winter, Tasha Suri, P Djeli Clark, Joe Abercrombie, CL Clark. Tolkien was foundational for me, and Aragorn summoning the Army of the Dead was a big inspiration for this book.

Any advice for *SFX* readers who are budding authors?
→ Get the bare bones of the whole story written – it doesn't have to be perfect. If you're stuck, skip ahead – the detail can come later. Read your favourite authors and break down why you love their work.

A Song Of Legends Lost is out on 8 April, published by Orbit.

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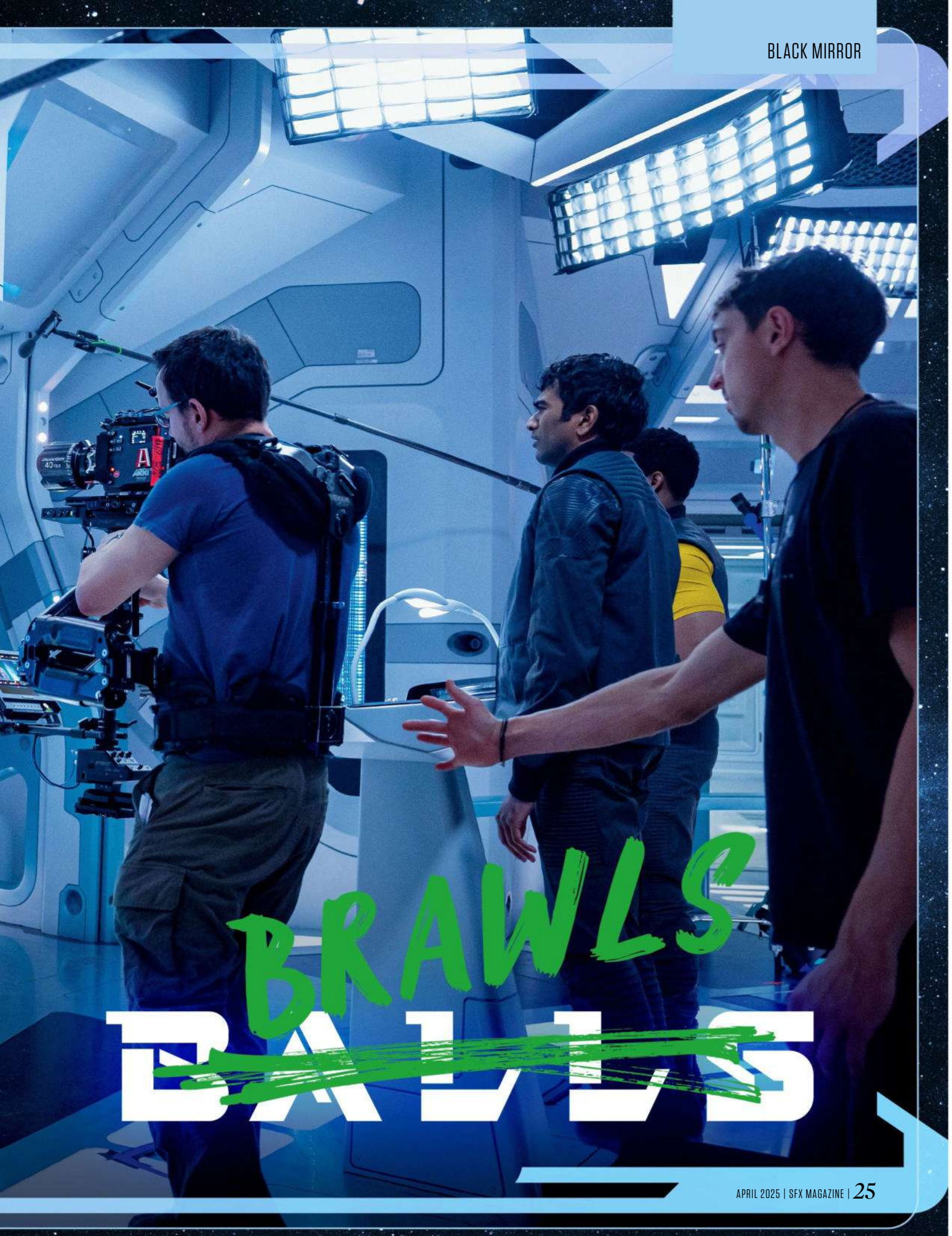
POTENTIAL SPOILERS!

SPACE

THE FIRST EVER SEQUEL EPISODE OF **BLACK MIRROR** BEAMS DOWN – SFX SETS AN INTERCEPT COURSE

WORDS: **DARREN SCOTT**



BRAWLS BALLS

Cristin Milioti, Toby Haynes and Jimmi Simpson.

AS WAKE-UP CALLS GO, SEEING A ballsack wasn't necessarily on the list of things we were expecting. At least this time the ballsack is in space.

It's early morning on Thursday 2 May 2024 and *SFX* is at Shepperton Studios in London to step back onto the bridge of the USS Callister once more (see *SFX* 294) for the first ever *Black Mirror* sequel.

In the original 2017 episode from series four, "USS Callister", Robert Daly, the creator of multiplayer game *Infinity* creates digital clones of his co-workers and places them inside a version of it based on his favourite sci-fi series, *Space Fleet*. But the cloned crew manage to kill him and escape into the game.

Now the crew – led by Captain Nanette Cole – find their problems are just beginning.

THE SEARCH FOR SPUDS

It's the penultimate day on the ship, with nine scenes being filmed – seven on the bridge and two in the corridor. This time, the bridge is much sleeker – it's a full 360 degree set with a ceiling – and everything *gleams*. There are LED lights everywhere in shades of green, white and blue, all facing a huge viewscreen with a view of outer space. So far, so *Trek*. Or should we say *Space Fleet* with an upgrade? It's about as high-value sci-fi as you can get.

Well, until we hear actor Jimmi Simpson ask loudly: "Can you prep my balls?" Director Toby Haynes bounds across the set with a look of glee, rubbing his hands together.

Simpson – returning as Walton – is dressed, barely, in a loincloth. His hair is long, his skin dirty and he's sporting a full beard. There is, obviously, a reason for this – it's *Black Mirror* after all. The loincloth is ill-fitting, and there's the prosthetic we never imagined we'd see on an *SFX* set visit.

The clapperboard comes in – it has the codename "Polygon" in a *Star Trek* font – for scene 59 alpha, take six.

"So why am I disgusting?" Simpson asks.

Milanka Brooks, back in blue make-up as Elena Tulaska, gives him a withering look from across the bridge. "Because ballsack visible."

"I'm going to go and put on more clothes," Simpson responds, leaving the bridge and showing a cheeky flash of buttock. Nerd fact – the script actually says "scrotum" but they've been trying different variations. It comes as no surprise that there's lots of laughs in the finished episode.

But for now the hilarity is on set, with the cast, including Osy Ikhile as Nate Packer and Paul G Raymond as Kabir Dudani, ad-libbing and trying various set-ups under the watch of Haynes.

"A bit more of a bad smell look," he says, "bit more judgement." There are various close-ups of Tulaska's dirty looks, which cause even more laughter.

"I could smell them from here," Dudani deadpans, causing Brooks to burst out laughing. "Pork scratchings. Barbecue Fritos wrapped in skin."

For the record it's absolutely fake and the only smell in the air is that of a freshly built wooden set.

"My eyes are up here," Simpson says quietly and the cast are off again.

THE NEXT GENERATION

It's not just the cast that have returned, but a lot of the production team too, Haynes explains as he leans on a console. "This crew has been honed over about three episodes. I think this is the best crew that *Black Mirror* has ever seen. The *Andor* stunt team is doing amazing stuff for us," he says of the crew he brought with him from the Disney+ *Star Wars* show.

Polygon is actually a pretty good sci-fi name...

"It's great to be back. Kind of weird. When we walked into this set being built, I've never had that where I've walked into a place where I filmed in seven years ago, and thought: 'What happened in between?'

"The first one was skinned like this," he says gesturing to the bridge around him, "but in a

PICTURES: NETFLIX. STOCK IMAGES: MAROOSHKA, SHTONADO, ANASTASIIA HEVKO/GETTY

Paul G Raymond and Milanka Brooks.

Director Toby Haynes thinks about the ballsack.

Walton and Nanette have a *Carry On* moment.

1960s way. We just changed a few colours and lit it differently. We're picking up very much off the heat off the first one and straight into the action on the new one. Trying to keep the energy and the humour and youthfulness of the first one."

Haynes shows us a rough cut of a planetary fight scene. With the crew now in the game with other players, they're rogue – Walton monetises it, they can't get money so they're robbing gamers for credits. It's certainly not a pastiche of a '60s TV show – does this mean that *Space Fleet* has now moved into its JJ Abrams era?

"Exactly," he laughs. "A few more lens flares. They're in the game now, so a more visceral experience for them as beings within this construct. It's upgraded as well. We definitely leant into the dated feel of *Star Trek* for the first one; this one's more action movie, more of a modern approach.

"But it's always great working with Charlie [Brooker] – we spend a lot of time in heavy meetings that are stressful and always come out laughing at the end of it. I'm loving it. I'm Mr Sci-Fi now. I've been lost in space for quite a few shows in a row, but I'm happy." This is the second of two episodes Haynes is directing this season – the other "an office-based psychodrama, fantastic cast" – but the "USS Callister" sequel is the longest of season seven, clocking in at just under 90 minutes.

But why do a sequel at all? "The simple answer to that is, as soon as the credits rolled on the first one I was like, 'Ahh, I wanna keep doing this story with these characters'," creator and writer Charlie Brooker tells *SFX* later. "Because where we left them, they literally flew into a whole new universe and had a whole new dilemma, which was that they are vulnerable, real people – or certainly people who feel they're real people – in a world in which it's a bit like *Fortnite* in space, →

effectively. You've got bullets flying overhead and nobody really cares about that because everyone else feels it's just a game, but for them, the stakes are very real.

"At the same time we had left Nanette Cole in the real world being terribly manipulated into doing all this stuff that ended up with Robert Daly dying. So there were certainly opportunities to carry on telling the story. The cast was so amazing, it was so much fun, that straight away it's been an ambition for a long time to do it.

"There was always a germ of a story, which was, what are their lives like now? Because they escape into *Infinity*," Brooker says of the plot points that brought him back. "Already at the start we immediately squirt some piss into the cocktail by having someone show up as a player, who immediately starts to attack them, which would be, of course, what happens. Then there were all sorts of things that we were thinking about, one which is the general monetisation of games, there's a bit of commentary on that.

"There was more to explore with the fact that these are the versions of them that are in the game – even though they've been through a terrible ordeal, they've sort of improved as people as a result of that, so that the virtual version of Nanette is kind of more accomplished and capable. She's had to – she's been tested and she's risen to the challenge whereas the real version of her is certainly, throughout the first instalment, meeker.

"There were also lots of character and situation things to explore. Robert Daly is dead, so we wanted to explore some of the legacy of that, and stuff that was alluded to in the first one about Walton, the boss and the way his company is run. So there was a lot there to dig into."

GAME BOY

Moving into the world of Infinity means bigger set-pieces and more confrontations in space. Producer Richard Webb shows us through photos of alien landscapes – actually a copper mine in Anglesey, Wales. In total they've had six weeks of filming, with prep beginning in January to deliver the episode at the end of 2024. He says the VFX are "huge" and will take "six or seven months" to complete.

He tells us about reshooting an ice planet – originally in a Wales slate quarry, but they →

Jimmi Simpson and Cristin Milioti: aww.

Big shout-out to all the sci-fi quarries of the world.

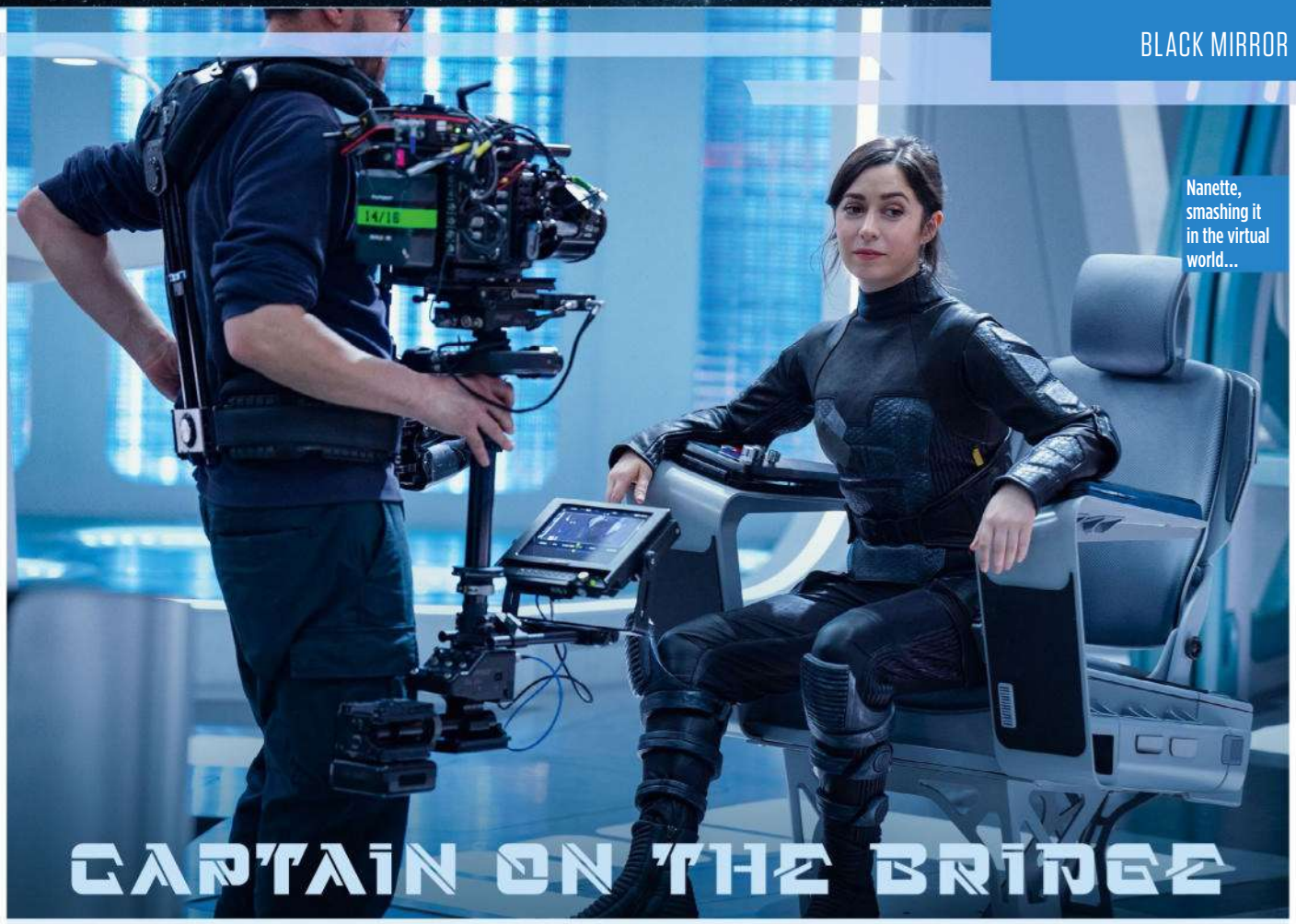
Haynes and Simpson rehearse their rap number.

TALES OF UNEASE

Charlie Brooker on the changing world of *Black Mirror*

"I do feel the show can constantly evolve – like the last season, we had episodes that went supernatural, it was horror. That was almost like a palate cleanser and then this season it's a bit more OG, they're all near-tech stories, or they're all sci-fi effectively, but the *Black Mirror* end of sci-fi. 'Callister' is very much *the* most overtly sci-fi we've ever gone.

"We've got other episodes this season which are what you might call more grounded, in a way the use of technology in everyday life fucking someone's world up, in a real world where there's athletes' foot. Hopefully it feels like it's so expansive and I can just keep it going."



Nanette, smashing it in the virtual world...

CAPTAIN ON THE BRIDGE

Cristin Milioti is Nanette Cole

When did you first hear about doing a sequel?
It has almost come together many times before this. I've been in touch with Charlie about it for six years. It went through so many iterations – him and I touched base about it a couple of times a year. I think the first time he reached out was less than a year after the original, to tell me he had a lot of ideas and that he was working on something, so this has actually been a long time in the making.

Where do we find the real Nanette at the beginning of the sequel?
The real Nanette has been living with the guilt that she was blackmailed into breaking into Daly's apartment and then he died afterwards. And she has no idea who blackmailed her, she has no idea why he has these DNA samples in his apartment, she has no idea whether she caused his death, so she has become a shell of a person. She lives in constant fear, living in a paranoid hell, so she's really on edge. When she sees the *New York Times* reporter coming to investigate Daly's death, she goes into hyperdrive to try and figure out what is going on, trying to piece together what he was doing with all of their DNA.

Are there any specific challenges that come with playing two versions of the same person?
I had to treat them like two separate characters. Because in the videogame, as captain, Nanette has found this confidence that she never had in the real world, and she has been almost killed and running for her life. She's in a combat zone, and how does that change someone?

Plus, she's leading this group of people. That is so completely different to real-world Nanette who has had difficult circumstances spinning out and being paranoid about causing Daly's death, but she is still living a somewhat comfortable life.

Can you recall stepping back on set for the first time?
It was really surreal and strange. It was cool, but I would say the first day I was on it I felt only existential panic, because it's so strange to be back in a place you haven't been in for seven years. I remembered where everything was – it felt like walking into a dream. The set is incredible but every set we have on this, every single location, our production designer is a genius, it was just really astonishing. It's so cool to be on a practical spaceship.

What do you believe this new episode tells us about the world we live in today?
I came at it from Nanette's meta-spiritual perspective, and so I think there's no escaping: wherever you go, there you are. Here she is thinking she made the most out of a horrible situation and found a part of herself that she would never have found in the real world, how great is that? But now she's having to deal with the fact she's actually not very good at this job and it's too much responsibility, and she's now desperate to get out again. It reflects back corporate greed, and the lack of respect for a human life in the name of commerce.

...well, most of the time, anyway. Oops.

Did you keep any souvenirs from the first episode?
I kept zero. I was too afraid to ask for anything, but from this I did keep a small panel from the spaceship. I wanted a credit stick, but they all got taken. All the blasters got taken, but I got a little panel off the wall.

Have you had any memorable fan encounters related to this?
I've had so many incredible interactions with people who loved that episode. I've been stopped on the street, stopped on the subway, and I've had people I've worked with mention that they absolutely loved it. The most flattering was when that episode came out, someone sent me a picture of a drag queen who did Nanette and that to me was the highest compliment that I could've ever been given. I have it saved on my phone. She nailed it, the full 1960s regalia, the giant hair – it's incredible.

decided that "with the amount of VFX we could build something better than that, lots and lots and lots of snow and big wind machines. *Doctor Who* territory. We are going for a blizzard. We're going to make a *mess*."

It raises the question of why they've chosen to go full on sci-fi for the sequel. "The funny thing about it is it's a bit of a workplace sitcom, so it's a very funny thing to say we wanna be in *this* world more, let's do this," executive producer Jessica Rhoades explains. "Where *Black Mirror* really sings is in the voices on the bridge and in those moments of the office and then you go, 'But you have to do the space battle! You're here!'

"So it's going to be big and it's going to be epic and the challenge was saying, 'How do you make sure it still fits in the tone of what you care about when you come to *USS Callister* and you come to *Black Mirror*?', which is character-driven, more detailed. So we wanted to make sure that we balanced that. So it is epic and I hope it feels that way and I hope we accomplished that, but we always want to make sure we're coming back to those characters."

The new set for the USS Callister is right fancy.

> **"It's Doctor Who territory... We are going for a blizzard. We're going to make a mess"**

Greenscreens provide the view out of the port.

Working buttons! Flashing lights!

Cristin Milioti and Paul G Raymond have a conflab.

"The other thing that was slightly in our head, obviously the first one was riffing on *Star Trek* and this one is slightly riffing on *Star Wars*," Brooker adds. "That was another slight difference and that meant, okay, scale-wise we're going to go down to some planets, we're going to have some pyrotechnics going off, we're going larger with more stuff going on in space than we had in the first one."

He laughs. "Toby was absolutely rubbing his hands together with glee at the possibility of doing all of that. But we kept saying, 'What's unique to our premise?'

"It's weird, because you sort of forget it's a game," Brooker notes. "To them it's real, obviously. So it plays out on that sort of scale, it feels a bit *Return Of The Jedi* or something along those lines, because it has to. But again, it being *Black Mirror*, that's happening, but there's also something going on where there's somebody watching it in the real world. It's constantly tying back to that – there's players who, if their ship explodes, wake up in their room in Wales.

"It's fun to constantly juxtapose the epic scale of the space opera with the personal politics of life on Earth."

Now that a *Black Mirror* episode officially has a sequel, the creative team says another episode with the crew of USS Callister isn't off the cards – or visiting other familiar faces. →

"And you want me to wear that *where*?"

Jimmi Simpson is Walton

When you see the ballsack coming, are you like: "I can't wait for this", or do you dread it?
No, I was excited because it made sense. It finished off a concept of Walton being stripped of everything. And he's a buffoon, he's there to be laughed at. Throw in some bollocks and lock that giggle in. I let them know, I'm here for whatever sight gag you want. If you want to raise up the butt part for a cheeky shot, let's just do it.

Toby is such a fun director, fucking precise, but also a child who's been given a sandbox full of his favourite things. It's delightful. It's such a supportive environment. Whoever's being funny, laugh at them. Then you can move forward with confidence.

How was it being asked to come back to something after seven years, particularly when you were presumed dead?
Well, that was the first thing. You've got to be dubious sometimes when things are extended more than expected. There can be some fakery. My first impulse was to think: Charlie's gonna figure a way out. I was beyond pleased with how he articulated that.

So what are we digging into with this episode of *Black Mirror*?
Charlie's looking at what it means to be you. How are we defined? Is it by others' perception, how we treat others, or is there a soul kind of thing? Walton's got a little soul rot. He was maybe born with it, and it was cultivated by his lavish lifestyle. Even the evolved Walton is still just behind evolution as far as empathy goes. He's trying his best, but they do share the same kind of clenched fist for a heart.

Has he reflected on Daly's death and his involvement?
He came to terms with his own shortcomings most deeply at the end of the first show. In this episode, Walton's clone is more removed from the Walton on the outside, so it's even clearer to see the disparity between Walton clone and real-life Walton. Real-life Walton is still gripped in the clutches of fear of losing possessions, losing status. Evolved Walton gives a fuck about the people around him a little more.

What does he think of Nanette being captain – would he have coveted it for himself?
Old Walton maybe, but he was broken again and again and again. He understands status doesn't really mean what he thought it meant. He's not super hung up. If anything, he understands more that he's not a great leader. When he does have to step in the captain's chair in this one, he does it with a bit of hesitation.

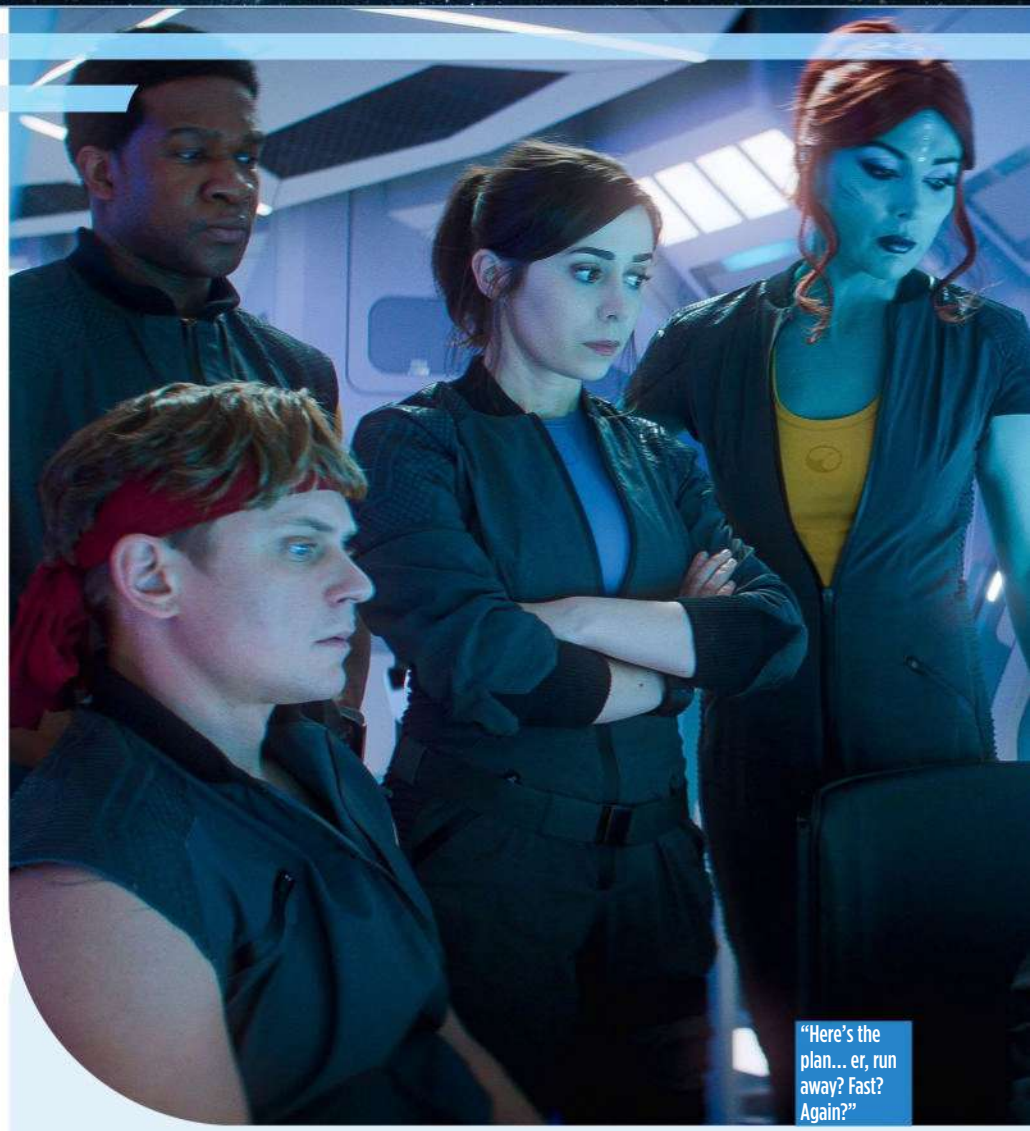
Cristin is a dream. She's such a gifted actor. Such a pleasure to work with her. Paul G Raymond – he's the highlight for me. He slays each scene he's in, and that's why I wanted to do a second part of "USS Callister", because I wanted to do more work with Paul G Raymond.
He's a gift.

You have LED walls this time – does that make it different?
It's mostly just what we're looking at out of the port window that's now a little bit more animated. But it doesn't seem to me on set that it's real space. We had to be greenscreened for half of the stuff anyway. But the fact that the cockpit feels practical, that's huge. The glowing teleporter, the fact that the controls do things, it really locks you in. It's a little nicer, a little bit sharper than first time around. They made it ultimately more realistic for us by building that cockpit.

Can you elaborate on the greenscreen?
I think the port window was greenscreen the first episode. In this one it's greenscreen half the time and then an approximation of a space view. It's all happening in-camera, the duplicating, so a moving camera. That's what's mindblowing: how they can blend them when the cameras are moving. The most technical thing is these like computerised jibs, so you have to smash the shots. It takes a lot of time.

If there was a chance to do more, would you be interested?
Of course. I would be a short-order cook for Charlie, if that's what he thought would make him happy.

Did you keep any souvenirs?
From the first one, I did take a souvenir. I pulled a piece of the spaceship off the wall. We were done filming and I yanked that off the wall, jammed it into my suitcase, and smuggled it home.


"Here's the plan... er, run away? Fast? Again?"

"I'd always be up for going again – the characters are so much fun, the cast is so great and the premise is so much fun," Brooker grins. "There'll be some other familiar faces elsewhere in the season, because I couldn't help it!" he laughs. "There's some characters you just want to write again, basically.

"So I would definitely always return to this. If there's a character I love to write, I'm always going to want to bring them back too. Sometimes there's scenarios there I definitely revisit but from a slightly different angle with different characters."

Rhoades adds: "It's also fun once an actor knows a character. Because with Cristin [Milioti] being able to come back there were moments where she was like, 'I think these are when I sit in it, let's talk about this' and there's these little moments that actually come out of some of their lived experience."

"Cristin's completely exploded in all sorts of ways and is a lovely person but she's also really smart," Brooker notes. "She's written stuff as well, so when she's approaching stuff, she's *really* good at articulating – even in quite bizarre scenarios! She's like, 'This version of me would be like...' It's just interesting to get

> **"If there's a character I love to write, I'm always going to want to bring them back too"**

that. She's super-articulate and clued-up about it and really *cares* about the work. When you're working with actors of that calibre who you get on with so well, you'd be an *idiot* to not want to continue working with them."

In that case, what about a spin-off Callister series? Rhoades laughs. "*That* would be expensive!"

"Possibly..." Brooker smiles. "Never say never, is what I would say. It's a departure for us to do a sequel episode at all. So it's interesting to see how that gets received and how that goes down. I wouldn't ever rule anything out. Definitely I can see a world in which you'd do a multi-episode story – the *Black Mirror* Cinematic Universe could evolve in all sorts of ways!

"There's certainly other scenarios from other episodes we could definitely revisit. Maybe in a different way, or with different characters. Unfortunately a lot of *Black Mirror* characters are either dead or devastated, but there's certainly certain scenarios that I've *often* thought, 'Oh, there's another story you can tell in that world', so I definitely would. Also throughout this season, as I said, there's a few other familiar faces that pop up and there's nods to previous

FELLOW TRAVELLERS

Osy Ikhile is Packer & Paul G Raymond is Dudani

Are you excited to be back on the bridge?
PGR: Not excited, just terrified of making the bad sequel.
OI: Really?
PGR: Oh yeah. Excited to see everyone, but pressure!
OI: I'm just more excited to see everyone again. I sit firmly in the camp of doing the job is the fun part. After that, it's none of my business. That alleviates the pressure. It's all about seeing their beautiful faces again. And ballsack.

Did you hope for a sequel?
PGR: There had been whisperings about this for a while, but I was convinced it would never happen because of various availability issues.

What happens with your characters?
PGR: It's weird. It's a combination of being in this awkward situation, but they have become this family unit. The first half, they're in these terrible situations but there's this warmth between them. There is this camaraderie and we have this captain and things are all going wrong. We've not seen them struggling, but they rely on each other and they depend on each other, which is really nice to have in the background while we're running around under stress and worrying about dying.
OI: This version of it, there's definitely more of a sense of survival of the clones – because they're in this game world, but they're the only ones that can actually just be deleted whereas everyone else gets to respawn. Everyone is ganging up on us like *Fortnite* or *Call Of Duty*, just willy-nilly killing people. For us, it's do or die. You see more of the real world, a glimpse of how Nate is still just an intern. But like everybody else on the game as well, they've grown from their tech world counterparts into survivalists in this game. It's fun to see.

What's Nanette like as a captain?
PGR: I think she's excellent from my character's perspective. We come from the same world. We're both coders. She's got that logical brain, but we're under a lot of pressure and she's trying to hold it together.
OI: Nate can definitely recognise where the cracks are starting to show and that she's starting to struggle a lot more than she's letting on.

Toby Haynes checks out a model for a set.

Gwion Glyn looks like he's straight out of *Borderlands*.

Is there more action in this episode?
OI: Yeah, I get to do some action. We got a really cool stunt unit who worked with Toby on *Andor*. They know what they're doing and it looks cool – it looks like I know what I'm doing!

What themes are tackled here?
OI: The first one that pops to mind is whether the clones deserve our empathy or not. Watching it, you feel for them, but in a real world aspect, if they're just technically AI, would you care? Because that's all they really are. That's gonna be an interesting question people might ask.
PGR: What's really cool about this episode is obviously the gender roles thing from the first episode. But this is about the person you could become from who you are, and how small things can change who you are for good or bad, you can become a strong or weak person. I think it's a really hopeful episode, because it shows you can be anything. I think that will give people some joy.

Would you guys be up for doing more episodes of *USS Callister*?
PGR: 100%.
OI: Yeah, if it comes around in another seven years, we're gonna need some de-ageing or something. But yeah, definitely.

episodes and there's quite a lot of reflection going on – no pun intended – throughout this season generally."

Rhoades adds: "It's coming from an organic place of what you want to write next, and what you want to write next is a character that you've had fun with in the past."

THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY

As for the future of *Black Mirror* beyond season seven, Brooker isn't being coy. "I'll keep making them as long as people keep watching it! I've constantly got a mental Rolodex of fully-formed story ideas, quasi-formed story ideas that could be glued together and are waiting for the moment where you go, 'That's a *Black Mirror* episode'.

"Sequels, spin-offs, all of that stuff is in there – how much of that comes out is up to the universe, basically. There's certainly ambitions, put it that way."

Can ambition keep up with the increasingly absurd events of the real world, though?

"There is an idea that I've been toying with, and even talking to people about – I'm slightly annoyed that several aspects of it have sort of come true," Brooker admits. "It's one I haven't done yet, so I keep thinking now, 'Is it too late to do that? Or does that mean it's perfectly timely to do that?' That would look like I was reacting to something, whereas I felt like I predicted it...

"It's difficult as a *human* to not fucking spin out reading the news constantly and feel like curling up in the foetal position. So that's more of an issue that it is in terms of coming up with material for the show."

"We had that last season with 'Joan Is Awful'," Rhoades recalls. "For a year Charlie went, 'This has to be this season or never.' Because it has to be *this* and quite literally I think it beat the conversation [about the use of AI] by five minutes. So that's the only thing in the way."

"Occasionally I'm like, have I missed that?" Brooker considers. "If this was a game of *Frogger*, have I missed that log? And I have to wait for another log – we've got a vintage videogaming episode this season as well...

"It just makes it difficult for all of us as humans walking around in the world – and it probably means this season there's probably fewer overtly dystopian episodes, in a way.

"There's more elements of hope, or there's more elements of escapism and elements of reflection. We've still got very chilling moments. I don't think anyone wants extra depression in their life at the moment!"

Black Mirror is on Netflix from 10 April.

ANDOR

STAR DIEGO LUNA AND SHOWRUNNER TONY GILROY TELL *SFX* HOW THEY'RE BRINGING *STAR WARS*' MOST CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED TV SHOW TO AN END

WORDS: **RICHARD EDWARDS**

THE REVOLT WILL BE TELEVISED

YOU ALREADY know where this story ends. In fact, in a break with standard *Star Wars* protocol, *Andor* creator/showrunner Tony Gilroy is quite happy to confirm that his show wraps up "with Cassian Andor walking out to the ship to go to the Ring of Kafrene".

There, as *Rogue One* detailed in 2016, he'll meet up with (and subsequently bump off) Rebel informant Tivik, setting forth a sequence of events that will result in the recovery of schematics for a certain armoured space station – plans that will help Luke Skywalker become the poster boy of the Rebellion.

Saying all this doesn't really count as a spoiler, however, because *Andor*'s second and final season is as much about the journey as the destination, completing Cassian's evolution from petty criminal to freedom fighter sacrificing his life for a cause.

"We all know what those guys do in *Rogue One*, and how important they are for *A New Hope* to happen," Diego Luna, who plays the eponymous Mr Andor, tells *SFX*. "But what is beautiful about Tony's work is the way he tells you a story you think you know in a way you don't see coming. I think that's the secret."

"Diego put his finger on it last year when he said, 'If you know where you're going it just makes it so much easier,'" adds Gilroy. "I think a lot of people start big projects, particularly in TV, then all of a sudden it takes off and they aren't really sure where it's supposed to go. We always knew where we were going, and that was a very helpful thing.

"The responsibilities of tying the final chapter of *Andor* into *Rogue One* fell into place more elegantly than we expected, and I think you'll see that we answer questions that always needed to be answered about the investigation that leads [Cassian to the Ring of Kafrene]. But it's always been a yin and yang, and every time we bump up against something canonical, we usually find an answer that's really helpful to everybody."

THE BEGINNING OF THE END

We've long known that Cassian's days are numbered, and that – along with his Rogue One teammates – he'll end up barbecued by the Death Star on a picturesque Scarif beach. But thanks to *Andor*'s second season, we can put an exact timescale on his life expectancy.

Over the course of 12 episodes, the show will take in the four years leading up to the fateful mission that costs Cassian his life, which – seeing as the show is among the most acclaimed TV shows or movies ever to emerge from the universe George Lucas built – feels rather quick. So why the rush?

Gilroy originally intended to follow the pattern of *Andor*'s debut run, devoting each season to a year in the future Alliance Intelligence officer's life. He now admits that the change of plan was "born out of desperation" and – seeing as it's now close to three years since season one launched – a potential battle against time.

Cassian Andor himself, Diego Luna, on the set.

"I think you'll see that we answer questions that always needed to be answered"

Director Orson Krennic (Ben Mendelsohn) broods.

"We were halfway through shooting season one, coming through Covid, and the monumental size of the show, the effort and everything else was just dawning on us," Gilroy recalls. "We realised that I didn't have enough calories to do it, and Diego's face couldn't take the timing, because it just takes too long to make it. We were saved by Disney saying, 'Okay, if you guys can figure out a way to do it, we're into it.'"

Gilroy's solution was to break the season up into four three-episode "chapters", each one picking up the story at a pivotal moment in Cassian Andor's life, before leaping forward a year or so to the next turning point in the story. The strategy is not dissimilar to the structure of the original trilogy, in which the three-year gap

between *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back* is effectively backstory. The three episodes of each chapter will drop on Disney+ on the same day: "In a way we did four movies," says Luna.

"It's a fascinating experiment and I don't know if anyone's ever done it before," explains Gilroy. "We're going to jump a year between each block, and we're going to use that negative space in a really interesting way, coming back for three days at a time, so it's like a Thursday, Friday, Saturday, or a Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday.

"The challenge is, how do you come back [to start each chapter]? We wanted to have it be as elegant and seamless as possible, and just hit the ground running. There was a lot of experimentation to make sure that would work."

Andor's first season didn't go easy on its leading man. Over the course of those 12 episodes, he became the Empire's most wanted, worked as a gun for hire on a Rebel raid on an Imperial base, and spent an extended period at the Emperor's Pleasure in the top-security Narkina 5 prison facility, unwittingly working on Death Star parts before leading an audacious escape.

He also saw childhood friend Bix Caleen (Adria Arjona) brutally tortured by the screams of Dizonite children, and lost his adoptive mother Maarva (Fiona Shaw) during the Empire's occupation of his home planet, Ferrix. Last time we saw him he was challenging Rebel Alliance leading light Luthen →

ROGUES GALLERY

Rogue One characters appearing in *Andor*

ORSON KRENNIC
(Ben Mendelsohn)

The bureaucrat responsible for delivering the Death Star on schedule is back for *Andor*'s second season. With many Imperial eyes pointing towards Palpatine's pet project, he's doing his best not to – ahem – choke on his aspirations.

K-2SO
(Alan Tudyk)

While C-3PO was programmed for protocol and a fluency in over six million forms of communication, K-2SO specialises in sarcasm. We're expecting to learn how Cassian Andor turns him into a purpose-built BFF who's also good in a fight.

MON MOTHMA
(Genevieve O'Reilly)

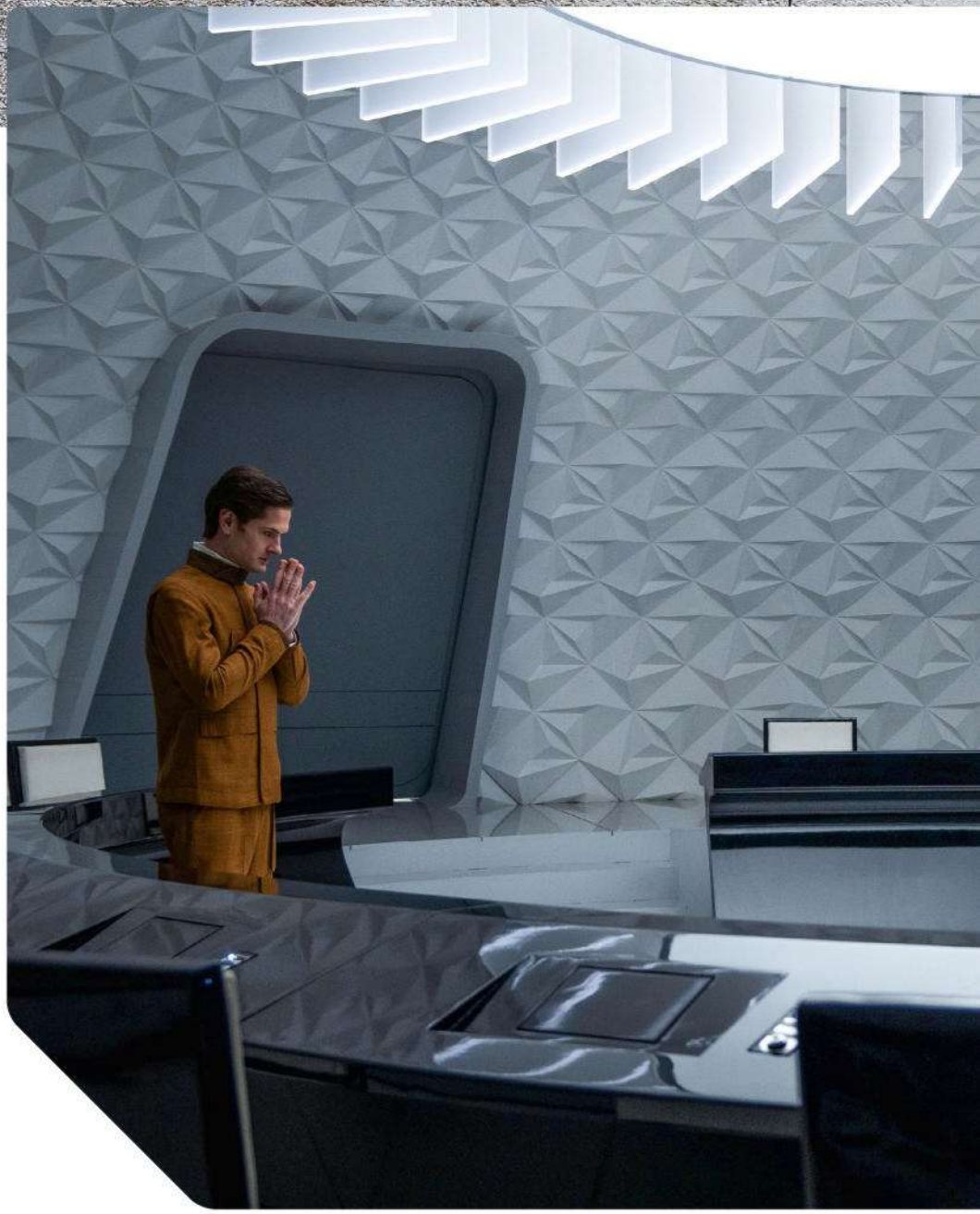
The Rebel leader who famously cared a lot about those poor Bothan spies played a bit-part role in *Rogue One*, and was strangely reluctant to send Cassian and co on their famous mission to Scarif. Expect her to go through the emotional wringer in season two.

SAW GERRERA
(Forest Whitaker)

The bad boy of the Rebel cause first came to prominence fighting alongside Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi during the Clone Wars. Seeing as he's been cybernetically enhanced in *Rogue One*, it seems likely he'll suffer some horrific injuries in season two.

RUESCOTT MELSHI
(Duncan Pow)

Eagle-eyed viewers will have spotted that Ruescott Melshi, a prisoner Cassian befriends on Narkina 5, is also part of the team that infiltrates Scarif in *Rogue One*. Melshi makes an appearance in the season two trailer, presumably enlisted in the Rebel ranks – though we'll see.



Rael (Stellan Skarsgård) to "kill me or take me in", and it's clear that Rael has seen something in the younger man that could benefit the Rebellion – even if Cassian hasn't yet seen it himself.

"I think Cassian realises he has to do something [about the Empire], but there's still anger and he still has to learn that this is not just about himself," says Luna. "There is a sense of a need for revenge and confrontation that is connected to his recent loss, and there's a lot of learning that needs to happen for him to be cold enough to make the choices he makes.

"At the end of season one there's still that feeling of, 'This is happening to my people, therefore it's happening to me and it hurts,' but now he has to become the guy we meet in *Rogue One* who is basically ready to put himself aside, who can be in charge of a mission that transcends all of his own desires and needs."

Over the course of the new season he'll meet the reprogrammed Imperial security droid who'll become the Chewbacca to his Han Solo, as the perennially sarcastic K-2SO (Alan Tudyk) returns to the fray.

"I always thought from *Rogue One* that it said a lot that his best friend was a droid," Luna admits. "It's crucial to understand that Cassian does have a problem having profound

> **"Luthen is many, many things, but a talent scout is really one of his primary skills"**

connections. He's quite cynical about everything and therefore, as Bix points out in season one, probably not the best friend you can find. But I think we've already seen that he understands friendship."

As a title, however, *Andor* doesn't really do the show justice. Sure, it's undoubtedly an origin story for the titular hero, but it's also the story of both the formation of the Rebel Alliance, and an Imperial machine stamping more and more control over the galaxy. Indeed, season one's vision of the Empire was far, far away from the Sith Lords who sit at its top table, showing us an organisation where power is just as likely to be wielded by accountants as AT-ATs.

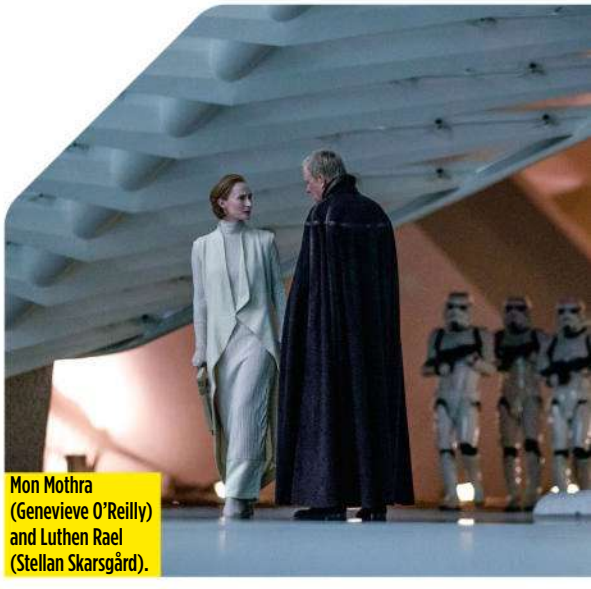
While *The Phantom Menace*'s obsession with trade routes and taxation was widely mocked, the *Brazil*-esque levels of bureaucracy in *Andor* are undeniably chilling – and that desk-based terror will continue to make its presence felt.

"It's crucial to the story and we'll be advancing and deepening that all the way through season two," says Gilroy. "We're going to bring out all the other tools of the Empire as we go along. Weaponry and muscle are just a piece of the puzzle, aren't they?" That said, the new season won't entirely forsake the big guns. Having made its *Andor* debut via a brilliant end-of-credits sting in the season one finale, that infamous spherical battle station (confuse it with a moon at your peril) will have a massive role to play – it even shares the season two poster with Cassian.

At risk of finding our way into *Private Eye*'s Pseuds Corner, *SFX* puts it to Gilroy that Andor's story is intrinsically linked to that of the Death Star, especially as they'll also have a crucial role to play in the other's destruction. Does he see it that way?

"You will revisit this question after the show airs," he laughs. "And you will feel very prescient about asking that question. You'll go back and look at it and say, 'Look how smart I was!'"

As for the Rebel Alliance, they're still in the process of getting their act together so they can mount a meaningful challenge to the Emperor, nearly two decades after he seized power during the *Revenge Of The Sith* revolution.



Mon Mothra (Genevieve O'Reilly) and Luthen Rael (Stellan Skarsgård).

Syril Karn (Kyle Soller) and Dedra Meero (Denise Gough).

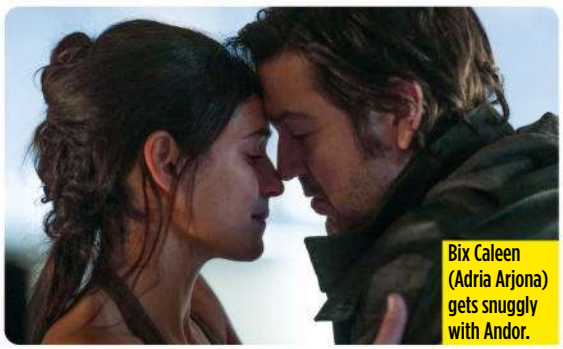
GENRE ROLES

Tony Gilroy on how far you can push the *Star Wars* envelope

Star Wars has traditionally been reluctant to play around with genre as much as its Disney stablemate Marvel, but *Andor* creator Tony Gilroy believes there's room to try new things in a galaxy far, far away.

"I think we've made our lane with *Andor*, and *Skeleton Crew* was trying to do their own, too. The hope is that you can do anything, and we're going to open up some canonical things and concepts in *Andor* that maybe will get people excited to do other things.

"I always fantasised that the show would break new ground, that someone would be able to make a three-camera sitcom in *Star Wars* or a horror movie. I think the first thing I said to Kathy [Kennedy, Lucasfilm president] when she said they wanted to open a line, was, 'Could you do a courtroom drama?' And why not? We've worked really hard on *Andor* to make our lane, and it's up to other people now to find another way to do it."



Bix Caleen (Adria Arjona) gets snuggly with Andor.

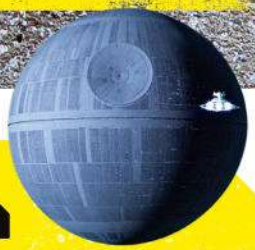
Season one seeded the idea that Mon Mothma (Genevieve O'Reilly), honourable senator for Chandrila, and antiques dealer Luthen Rael are the mother and father of the Rebellion – with the insurgent Saw Gerrera (Forest Whitaker) the metaphorical devil whispering in Rael's ear – and that push/pull relationship will continue as the stakes get higher.

"Canonically there are other Rebel groups happening," says Gilroy, "and there's a great deal of other material that's out there about them [*Star Wars Rebels* sits alongside *Andor* in the *Star Wars* timeline]. We'll touch on some of these things as we go, but in our story Mon and Luthen really are the founders."

Luthen, in particular, is an enigma, a man who in one life could guest star on Coruscant's answer to *Cash In The Attic*, but in the other is the ruthless Rebel coordinator who ordered Cassian's death to preserve his own undercover status.

"Luthen is many, many things, but a talent scout is really one of his primary skills," Gilroy explains. "He's a sort of human resources wizard for an insurgency, and he found great talent in Cassian. The problem is that he needed Cassian so badly that he became exposed, so when he decided to kill Cassian it was because this guy had seen his face and become a liability.

"Luthen's problem in the second season is that he's been building something in his garage for 15 years as a start-up, and now he's going to →



A DEATH STAR IS BORN

Eight facts about the Empire's infamous battle station

The Death Star starts out as a Separatist project in the prequel trilogy. Its first canonical appearance comes in *Attack Of The Clones*, when Geonosian ruler Poggle the Lesser hands prototype plans to Sith Lord Count Dooku. The planet's population was later wiped out to protect the Emperor's little secret.

The original Death Star is 160km (100 miles) wide at its equator. That would equate to a *very* small moon in real life, as Ceres – the largest asteroid in our Solar System – has a diameter of just under 1,000km.

The Death Star's superlasers are powered by very large kyber crystals. Smaller versions of the crystals can be found in Jedi lightsabers.

During construction its working title was Project Stardust.

The thermal exhaust port glitch that made the Death Star vulnerable to proton torpedo attack was intentional, introduced by lead scientist Galen Erso.

The Death Star is home to nearly two million staff, a mix of military and civilian personnel. In other words, Randal in *Clerks* was right to be concerned about all those unfortunate construction workers killed on Death Star II in *Return Of The Jedi*.

The dianoga that makes its home in the Death Star's trash compactor is a squid-like creature from Vodran, a planet in Hutt Space. It's unknown whether it made it off the Death Star alive...

Canonically, the Death Star's first target is Jedha City on Jedha, and it subsequently wipes out most of Scarif, too. The first opportunity to demonstrate its full, planet-obliterating power comes on Princess Leia's homeworld, Alderaan.

"Yeah, definitely rising damp. It'll cost ya."

go public. That's one thing if you're selling a new bicycle tyre, but if you're selling a spy network, it's very, very difficult to go large. The threat to secrecy and the difficulty of managing paranoia is a huge part of the second season."

Mothma, meanwhile, doesn't have the luxury of living in the shadows. In season one she had to look in some pretty murky places to secure the funding the nascent Alliance requires, and is on the verge of arranging her teen daughter Leida's marriage to the son of "thug" and oligarch Davo Sculdun in the name of the cause.

Over the course of the new season, we'll see her journey from Coruscant opulence to living as a fugitive in the Rebel base on Yavin IV.

"I think Mon Mothma's path on this show is the most extreme of anyone's because she has to live it in public," says Gilroy.

"The corollary advantage of covering the four years across this season is that we have the ability to use time as a tool in a way I've never had before, to show what time and attrition and pressure and betrayal and failure and the hope of success can do to people in extreme circumstances. It's really a terrible burden on her, so it's amazing she can even function when she gets to Yavin."

Andor's first season stood out from the other shows in Disney+'s *Star Wars* stable. Not only did it steer clear of lightsabers, hokey religions and references to animated TV series you might not have seen, it also dealt with more grown-up themes in a considerably more complex way – season one featured around 200 speaking parts, and that level of detail isn't going anywhere.

"Obviously we have to meet a lot of new characters that we didn't see in season one, and there's a lot of stories that have no conclusion yet, so it's a very complicated season in terms of the number of characters and stories that co-exist," explains Luna.

"We also travel to more planets, with more diversity and richness in terms of the places we

Luthen Rael, perhaps the original rebel (rebel).

Mon Mothma takes time out for a game of Patience.

"These aren't the droids you're looking for."

Orson admires his prime parking space from afar.

see Cassian as his work becomes more and more challenging. It's a gigantic show."

Andor's first run also attracted levels of critical acclaim rarely experienced in the *Star Wars* universe, as well as multiple award nominations and the sense of a story that could appeal to people who didn't usually invest their time in battles beyond the stars. It appears that affection has had a crucial role to play in the show's return.

"It's been such a weird thing," says Gilroy. "Last time it took 10 weeks or so for the show to come out, and it was just like this rolling affirmation. It was very odd and fun. It helped us because it helped Disney make the big bet that they had to make on the second season, and it's a really big bet.

"So with [Disney CEO] Bob Iger coming back, and Kathy [Lucasfilm president Kathleen Kennedy] going to bat for us, the critical praise and the passion of the audience that came right away were really helpful in helping us get the resources we needed to make season two."

So when the mission comes to an end with Cassian's fateful (but inevitable) journey to the Ring of Kafrene, will we have an altered perspective on *Rogue One*? Gilroy admits he's "been very timid about going and looking back at it", but believes "it certainly has to affect very deeply your relationship with Cassian."

Luna goes a little further. "If you have your DVD or Blu-ray of *Rogue One*, you should plug it in as soon as the season ends, and you'll see a film that will be resignified.

"You're going to see it differently, with so much information you didn't have before. You knew nothing about this bunch of Rebels that got together and made this sacrifice, and then we did a show of 24 episodes about one of them.

"I definitely believe it's going to change the experience because it's now so full of answers

> **"It's a very complicated season in terms of the number of characters and stories"**

– almost many more than you even wanted when you watched *Rogue One*, like who Cassian's mother was, what was the first droid he had a strong connection with [that'll be B2EMO], how his bedroom was...

"You've seen enough of this man now that you will go, like, 'Holy shit, *that*'s what he meant,' and your relationship to this person and everything going on in *Rogue One* is going to be resignified."

We may know exactly where *Andor* is going, but the last leg of the journey is set to throw up a whole lot of surprises.

Andor: A Star Wars Story is on Disney+ from 22 April.

PICTURES: DES WILLIE, HAYLEY BENOIT, LUCASFILM/DISNEY, STOCK IMAGES: KWAIGON, MIGUEL MARTINS DESIGN/GETTY

THE VOYAGE HOME

NCUTI GATWA'S SECOND RUN OF **DOCTOR WHO** SEES THE TIME LORD TASKED WITH AN EPIC QUEST: GETTING NEW COMPANION BELINDA BACK HOME IN ONE PIECE.

PRODUCERS RUSSELL T DAVIES AND JOEL COLLINS TELL US MORE

WORDS: **IAN BERRIMAN**

WANT TO FEEL OLD? This issue of *SFX* goes on sale 20 years to the day that *Doctor Who* returned to our screens with "Rose". Yes, *Who* fans, the revival now spans the same time period that stretched between two teachers from Coal Hill School finding a humming Police Box in a junkyard, and Peter Davison's celery enthusiast meeting his predecessors in the Death Zone.

It's a remarkable achievement in a televisual landscape where you're lucky if your favourite Netflix show gets greenlit for a second season, and one we've perhaps rather come to take for granted – something recent negative buzz around the series (generated by right-wing newspapers with an axe to grind) has brought into sharp focus. The official word on the show's future remains the same as it always has been: a decision will be made after season two has aired.

In the meantime, the buzz among people who actually love the series is more upbeat, following a well-received trailer for Ncuti Gatwa's second season. And it's the pleasures in store for viewers in the latest batch of eight episodes that *Who* overlord Russell T Davies

> **"What I wanted was someone more the Doctor's age to confront him a bit more"**

and executive producer Joel Collins are fully focused on.

The first thing us journos always want to know about a TV show's new season is how it differs from the last. Collins expresses it in terms of increasing confidence. "Doing the specials and season one was an exploration of the toolkit, pushing boundaries and seeing where you go," he tells *SFX*.

"I'd like to think we've really honed our craft. By the time we got to season two we really had a good understanding of how to make a show this complicated. We were working like a train: it wasn't trying to figure out how to get started and bumping along different tracks, we were steaming along. So there's something in it that's got a kind of accelerated energy."

In story terms meanwhile, a key distinction is the introduction of Varada Sethu (or as Davies routinely addresses her, "V") as new companion Belinda Chandra. "It's really the whole new energy that Belinda brings, that V brings with her, that defines the whole series," Davies says. "Having Belinda on board is a different take. Part of what I wanted to do was to show the range of the show – that it's not always one companion with the Doctor, you can bring new people in. But also Belinda is that bit older.

"The joy of Millie [Gibson, as Ruby Sunday] was she was a genuine 18-year-old playing an 18-year-old," he explains. "What we didn't quite realise though was that sometimes that can make the Doctor look a bit paternal – just in the writing, because Ncuti plays it with the full joy of youth. What I wanted was someone more the Doctor's age to confront him a bit more, to challenge him, while Ruby is on Earth finding herself and becoming older in herself, to attack him on all fronts. So that's a subtle shift."

The showrunner cites a brief moment in episode two indicative of the dynamic.

Ncuti Gatwa and Varada Sethu have a larf.

PICTURES: JAMES PARDON, LARA CORNELL, MAXINE HOWELLS/BBC STUDIOS. STOCK IMAGES: SUMROENG/GETTY

New companion Belinda Chandra (Varada Sethu, middle).

Freddie Fox: "a fearsome villain", we're told.

"Belinda has to introduce the Doctor to someone. She says, 'This is the Doctor.' Then she turns to him and says, 'Just the Doctor?'. He says, 'Yes', and she says, 'Ridiculous.' Sometimes we need someone to part the curtains on the wizard and say, 'What you get away with is quite mad.' It's lovely to bring a voice like that in: the voice of sanity. It's probably the voice of your best mate who sits watching *Doctor Who* with you."

"You've got somebody who is responsible," says Collins. "Y'know, she's a nurse, she has a very responsible job. It's somebody who knows their mind, and is an independent, strong-minded character." →

"SHE'S THE MAIN CHARACTER IN HER OWN STORY"

Varada Sethu introduces Belinda Chandra

Varada Sethu gets used to her new surroundings.

What can you tell us about Belinda's background and personality?
She's a nurse from modern-day times, and is, I think, very, very independent – very much has her own purpose, has her own life, has her own narrative. I get the feeling that she's the main character in her own story, and it just so happens to be gatecrashed by the Doctor. Now she wants to return to her own plot, but is caught up in this mad world that he sort of drags her into.

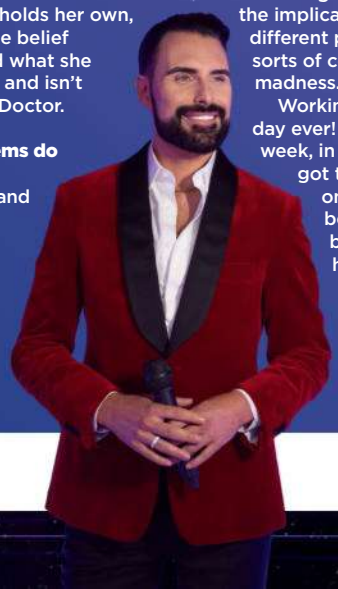
It looks like their relationship is fairly... maybe "spiky" isn't the right word, but she's quite assertive with him.
Yeah, I would say so. And I really appreciate that as well, because I get the feeling that it's not often the companion is sort of... yeah, I can't think of another word other than "spiky". What I admire the most about Belinda is that she really holds her own, she really stays true to the belief systems that she has, and what she thinks and how she feels, and isn't afraid to stand up to the Doctor.

What kind of belief systems do you mean?
I think in some ways her and the Doctor make a good team, because they fundamentally believe in doing the right thing and in saving lives – as many lives as possible. They're both very quick to sacrifice themselves for the good of the world. I mean, that's the nature of her job as well, being a nurse, so much of it is about serving other people, and I think that's where her values come into how they travel through time and space. Everything they're doing is for what they believe is the good of the world.

Do you have any particular favourite episodes?
I love episode two [featuring Mr Ring-A-Ding]. I think it might be my favourite of the season. That yellow dress was so special. The moment you put it on in the morning, it just transforms you: you're there, you're in character, you're in that world. Stunning!

But episode six [featuring the Interstellar Song Contest] is one of my favourite episodes as well. I can't choose – I really can't. It's huge, and eccentric, and obviously the implication is that there's lots of different planets involved, so there's all sorts of colours and creatures and madness.

Working with Rylan was the best day ever! I saw him every morning that week, in the make-up truck, but I only got to actually shoot with him for one day, which was just the best. I felt like we'd already built a rapport, and he's hilarious. What a joy. And [writer] Juno Dawson was also great – she would be on set, and there's an energy that she brings to the show that's just spectacular. It's exactly what was needed.



The Doctor and Belinda go retro in episode two.

In the season two trailer, Belinda tells the Doctor "You need to get me home", and he explains that may involve taking "the long way round". Said journey becomes a lengthy arc, because "a mysterious force is stopping their return".

"The season-long quest is to get Belinda home," Davies says. "Getting her back turns out to be problematic, and that's when her values come to the fore: when she's alone in outer space with this nutter in his ever-changing costumes. How is she going to assert herself and find herself?"

We remark that it all sounds – referencing a feisty '80s companion similarly swept away against her wishes – a wee bit Tegan Jovanka. "She really wants to get home," Davies says, "And I don't blame her either. Do you know what a dangerous world it is with the Doctor? There's always a danger that we go, 'Oh, isn't it great with all of the planets and vistas in front of you?' Actually, there's an awful lot of people

> **"The journey to get Belinda home is both a fun one, but also a dangerous one"**

that want to kill you everywhere you land. You wouldn't get me setting foot in a war zone! And I think Belinda's clever enough to take that attitude as well."

"It's really exciting, and it's darker in places," is Collins's view on the arc. "The journey to get Belinda home is both a fun one, because you travel to so many places, but also a dangerous one."

Sethu was cast after impressing in season one's "Boom" as Anglican Marine Mundy Flynn. Such a scenario isn't all that uncommon in the history of the series (see opposite page). While often the resulting physical similarity between characters is ignored, this time it's hardwired into the overarching story, with the Doctor showing Belinda an image of Mundy and telling her, "There is something already connecting us".

To be crystal-clear: going home means getting back to *modern-day* Earth, not simply the planet: trips into Earth's past are still possible. "Getting back to a very specific date," Davies teases. "That'll make sense once you watch the whole season."

The journey's necessary in the first place due to an amusing plot device. "When Belinda is 16, her boyfriend buys a star in her name, like you can with those star registers," Davies explains. "Then 17 years later the robots who live around that star come to get their queen! The planet is called Miss Belinda Chandra 1, and the robots of Miss Belinda Chandra 1 come to get her. That's the mess the Doctor has to walk into. It turns out to be more complicated than that, but that's the opening gambit."

Back in April 2024, we were told the Fifteenth Doctor would have "two companions by his side". Though it wasn't specifically stated in the press release, many inferred that meant the Doctor travelling with two companions in the TARDIS. But Ruby Sunday's on Earth, in 2025. If something's blocking Belinda's return, does that mean they won't meet until the two-part finale? "You'll just have to watch!", Davies straight-bats, protecting his secrets as always.

Of course, this being *Doctor Who*, anything could happen. Maybe there's a way the two could meet in the past (perhaps UNIT find a spare vortex manipulator in a drawer?). Maybe they're able to communicate across time and

FLOOD WARNING

Keep your eyes peeled for Anita Dobson!

The trailer includes a glimpse of Anita Dobson's mysterious neighbour Mrs Flood, seated at the Intergalactic Song Contest. Will we finally get closure on her identity by the end of the season?

"There are answers, there are spectacular answers," Davies says, promising us more costumes to rival the fluffy white fur coat Dobson rocked at the end of "Empire Of Death". "She's at her finest. And you will see her every single week – she's in every single episode. You won't ever quite know where and when to expect her..."

"Have we got time for a quick dance number?"

Oh lawd, he's comin'... it's Mr Ring-A-Ding!

When will we see Ruby Sunday (Millie Gibson) again?

Guns? The Doctor can't be too happy about that.

space. Or maybe Ruby will have a parallel storyline, and we'll drop in on her (and UNIT) every so often. Time, as ever, will tell.

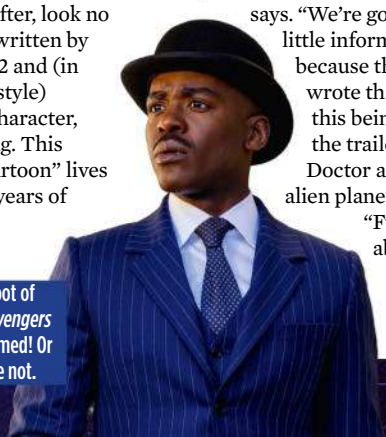
If it's new tricks you're after, look no further than episode two (written by Davies), which is set in 1952 and (in *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* style) features a fully-animated character, the sinister Mr Ring-A-Ding. This "happy, funny, singalong cartoon" lives in Sunny Town. But "after years of repeats in cinemas", the publicity blurb goes, he "suddenly looks beyond the screen and sees the real world outside", then passes into our own reality.

"The swings are wilder than ever," Davies says of the season, which looks set to follow in season one's footsteps by delving into full-blown fantasy more than *Who* typically does. "I mean, you've seen Mr Ring-A-Ding – what is Mr Ring-A-Ding like? It's nuts! It's the most beautiful animation by Framestore, with Alan Cumming's voice."

A German Disney+ trailer has revealed another first: somehow, the Doctor and Belinda get transformed into animated form too. Though whether that lasts 20 seconds or 20 minutes remains unclear.

Further freshness comes in the form of three newcomers making their debut contributions to the series. First up is "up-and-coming writer" Sharma Angel-Walfall. "We go from Mr Ring-A-Ding to the scariest episode," Davies says. "We're going to try and release very little information about episode three, because that's terrifying. Sharma and I wrote that together." Our money's on this being the episode glimpsed in the trailer where a spacesuited Doctor and Belinda freefall to an alien planet.

"Funnily enough, I met Sharma about 15 years ago, when she →



A reboot of *The Avengers* confirmed! Or maybe not.

SECOND ACT

Varada Sethu is not the first companion actor to be a familiar face

PETER PURVES

As Morton Dill, an Alabama hayseed who briefly encounters the TARDIS crew and a Dalek on the observation deck of the Empire State Building in episode three of "The Chase" (1966), Peter Purves impressed William Hartnell. He recommended producer Verity Lambert to cast him as space pilot Steven Taylor. Purves debuted in the role just three episodes later.

NICHOLAS COURTNEY

On first meeting UNIT's Brigadier Lethbridge-Stewart (or *Colonel*, as he was then) in 1968's "The Web Of Fear", the Second Doctor really should have remarked on his familiar physiognomy. Nicholas Courtney (sans the Brig's trademark tache) previously acted alongside William Hartnell, playing Space Security Service agent Bret Vyon across four episodes of 1966 epic "The Daleks' Master Plan".

IAN MARTER

Unable to take up the role of UNIT captain Mike Yates after auditioning, Marter made his *Who* debut in 1973's "Carnival Of Monsters" as an officer on the SS Bernice, a cargo ship snatched out of time from 1926. Producer Barry Letts remembered him the following year when casting old-fashioned army doctor Harry Sullivan.

LALLA WARD

In 1979, Mary Tamm's determination to only do one year as Time Lord companion Romana created a problem for producer Graham Wiliams. The solution: a cheeky season-opening regeneration into the form of Princess Astra – as played by Lalla Ward in the preceding story, "The Armageddon Factor".

FREEMA AGYEMAN

Before she became Martha Jones, Agyeman had a small supporting role in "Army Of Ghosts" as Adeola Oshodi, a Torchwood Canary Wharf employee who quickly meets a sticky end at the hands of a Cyberman. A line of dialogue in "Smith And Jones" explained that she was Martha's cousin.

KAREN GILLAN

Peter Capaldi's role in "The Fires Of Pompeii" – six years before he appeared as the Doctor – has rather overshadowed another early appearance: the future Amy Pond, given all of three lines as an unnamed soothsayer for the Sibylline Sisterhood.

Pretty much how we last saw Ruby Sunday.

was a young student and I gave a talk at the Contact theatre in Manchester," Davies continues. "Obviously I don't remember that, but she does, which was very nice of her.

"She's been working with Sally Wainwright [on *The Ballad Of Renegade Nell*], and with Paul Abbott [on *Wolfe*], she's been in a lot of writers' rooms. She had a project here at Bad Wolf [Studios]. She was pushed forward for me for this, and I loved her straight away – that *energy*."

Episode five – the one in the trailer which looks to be set somewhere in Africa – is the work of Nigerian-born playwright and poet Inua Ellams, surely the first *Doctor Who* writer to be awarded an MBE for services to the arts *before* writing for the series.

When *SFX* asks which is the strangest episode, Varada Sethu plumps for this one – but can't tell us why. "It's a different take," Davies says, keeping his cards close to his chest. "A different mythology. It's actually an episode about what mythology *is*."

> **"It's a ferocious piece of production: the lighting, the sets, the performances"**

"There's a wonder to the story that [Ellams] brings," Collins says. "He brought another world's view – the understanding of another time, another place on the Earth that he could bring authentically. It's a really beautiful piece of work – very complicated."

Davies became aware of Ellams's talents after seeing his play *Barber Shop Chronicles*, set across six black barber shops on a single day. "I thought it was the most wonderful piece of writing I'd seen in years," Davies says. "Then it turned out [previous producer] Chris Chibnall had been talking to him about writing an episode, because Inua loves *Doctor Who*.

"He'd been after writing *Doctor Who* for years. So sometimes chance converges, and it's all meant to be." (Incidentally: if you pause the scene in the trailer where the Doctor's sucked out of a doorway, you'll realise it's set in... a barber shop.)

A CUP UPSET?

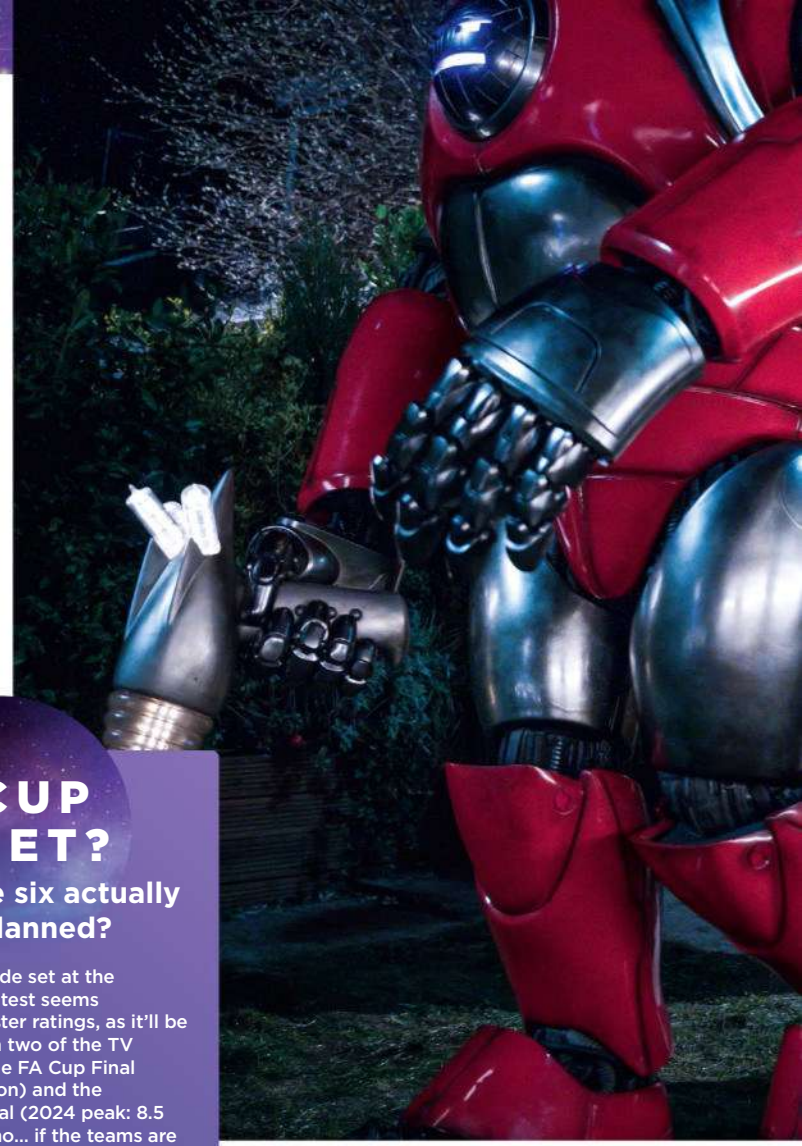
Will episode six actually air as planned?

Juno Dawson's episode set at the Interstellar Song Contest seems guaranteed blockbuster ratings, as it'll be sandwiched between two of the TV events of the year: the FA Cup Final (2024 peak: 8.6 million) and the Eurovision Grand Final (2024 peak: 8.5 million). But wait a mo... if the teams are drawing at 90 minutes, the football will go to extra time. And the start of Eurovision is immovable. Then what?

"Well spotted!" says Russell T Davies. "It's going to be very, very interesting what happens. Honestly, that day it'll be like, 'Are we transmitting or not?'"

Not that he's overly concerned. "They did run this past me and say, 'Do you want to take that risk?', and I said, 'That's the sexiest fucking risk I've ever heard in my life. Let's do it!' I will, probably for the first time in my life, be sitting watching the football wondering what's going to happen. And I love it. My god, do you want this programme to make a noise or not?"

How likely is it? Of the last 10 finals, two went to extra time, so let's say 20%. Place your bets! But don't fret – it's not as if the episode will vanish into the ether. "It'll be on the iPlayer, and probably be transmitted on the Sunday or something – it's all fine!"



Finally, Juno Dawson, who previously penned the BBC Sounds podcast *Doctor Who: Redacted*, contributed episode six. This one's a major talking point, being set at the 803rd Intergalactic Song Contest.

"We're lucky to get Juno," Davies says. "She's a *New York Times* best-selling fantasy novelist [with the Her Majesty's Secret Coven series], so we're lucky she's got time to even gaze down upon us!

"I've known Juno for years, so ever since I got the job of coming back it was in the air, but when you're a novelist you're busy all over the place, so I never knew whether I'd get her. Also, I kind of waited for that Interstellar Song Contest story, because it took time for us to believe we could make that episode, and I thought, 'If ever we do, that's so right for Juno.'"

The modern-day Eurovision is a gigantic spectacle. Matching that for a drama is a daunting task, which presumably involves some big production numbers. "Lots of them!" Davies says. "It's partly why it was hived off as an episode of its own. Normally we do blocks of two episodes per director, but that and episode five were separated because it's such a piece of work that [director] Ben A Williams had to come in early.

"Eurovision nowadays is the most glossy, expensive stage show you will ever see," he

The BBC just calls these "Robot". Mysterious.

That awkward moment when she meets your ex...

"Is that Mrs Flood up to something again?"

"I would say 'Run!', but there's no gravity..."

continues. "It's a ferocious piece of production: the lighting, the sets, the performances, everything. That's why we didn't do it in the first year – we took the time to build up to this one, to make sure that we could do it. Because it's properly epic."

It features former *The X-Factor/ Celebrity Big Brother* contestant Rylan Clark (appropriately, given his role as a commentator on the Eurovision semi-finals) – and it's a proper acting role. "He's in it more than you'd think," Davies says. "I think people think he's going to turn up and go 'Welcome to the Song Contest!', then have a cameo appearance. It's more than that."

The episode's tone may also defy expectations. "It's darker than people are going to think it is," Davies reveals. "I think they think it's just gonna be a laugh, but you can't sustain a laugh like that for more than four minutes really. It's a much tougher piece of work than you're expecting."

"It's a fun watch, in the right places," Collins adds, "But it's not *just* fun – it's got depth, and it's got emotion."

We're imagining composer Murray Gold beavering away bashing out the Lakertyan equivalent of Nemo's "The Code". Might there be the opportunity for a commercial release, as happened with "The Goblin Song" from "The Church On Ruby Road"?

"I don't know what the strategy's going to be," Collins says, "But it'd be really fun if one of our bits of music created some attention – if one of these brilliant moments could somehow get to number one. There's a background song that's so mad – maddening and brilliant."

All being well (see the boxout on the opposite page), the episode will be transmitted immediately before the Eurovision final. Planning this was, Davies reveals, a bit of a nightmare. "Let me tell you, that was like organising Operation Desert Storm!" he laughs. "Of all the things we've had to do, the hardest was getting all those broadcasting giants to commit to what date that would be transmitted on.

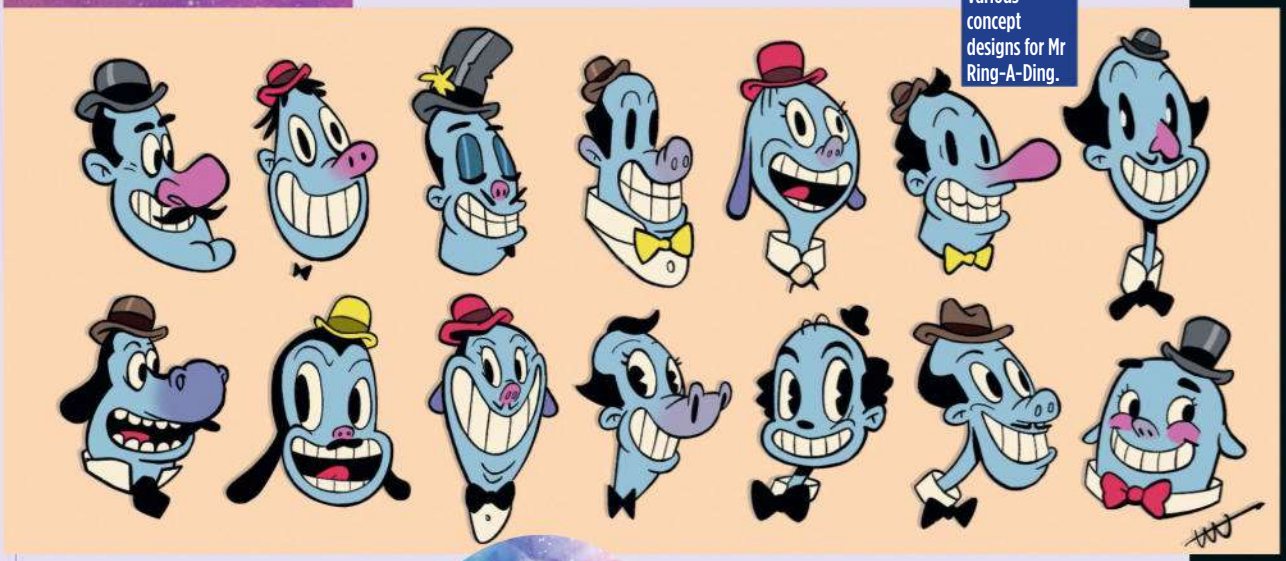
"I thought it was fixed in the calendar. Oh no! Once a country's won they can go away with the choice of two dates, and take *an awfully fucking long time* deciding! We had a set of plans over here, a set of plans over there, and another set of plans if it all fell through, and by sheer doggedness we won in the end.

"I actually thought we wouldn't win that one, but we got there, and it's going to make such a difference on the night. It's going to be such a laugh to have the Interstellar Song Contest followed by the Eurovision Song Contest. I mean, if that's not the BBC at its finest!"

Worth the full £169.50 for the licence fee, some might say! And with Eurovision a massive deal in numerous Disney+ territories, hopefully it will help the show hit the numbers their bean-counters are looking for. Keep 'em crossed...

Doctor Who season two premieres on BBC One and iPlayer (and Disney+ globally) on Saturday 12 April.

Guest star Rose Ayling-Ellis is looking fraught.



Various concept designs for Mr Ring-A-Ding.

DESIGNING DOCTOR WHO

Production designer Phil Sims talks about some of the inspirations for episodes one and two

DURING NCUTI GATWA'S first season, five of the eight episodes were set on Earth – four in the modern day. And when we did visit alien planets, we saw an Earth-like city ("Dot And Bubble"), and a battlefield ("Boom"). You'd imagine this year's "Get Belinda home" arc might tip the scales in favour of strange new worlds. So when we catch up with production designer Phil Sims, the first thing we ask is whether season two leans into pure sci-fi a little more.

"This season, the gloves are off," he says. "The team have gone sci-fi-tastic with it. I think it feels more like spooky *Doctor Who*, and more like the sci-fi *Doctor Who* that I grew up with."

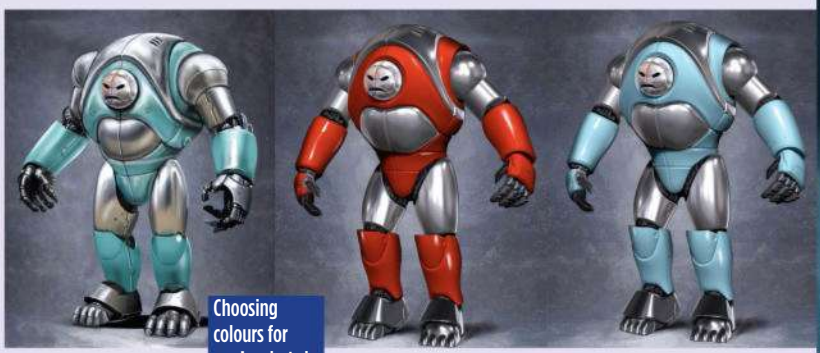
He gives the example of episode three, which involved filming in a classic *Doctor Who* location: a quarry! "Before season one, I had trepidation and excitement in equal measure regarding quarries," Sims says, noting that if not done well it can look like a cheap option. "So I was mindful of that going into episode three. But in the knowledge of *Prometheus*, and other movies that have done off-world colonies really well, we got excited about it, and realised as soon as we went to the locations what we could do.

"With every brief we've had, we've pushed it as far as we possibly can, being as ambitious as we possibly can," he continues. "Where it's sci-fi it's really sci-fi, and where it's fantasy it's as fantasy as we could make it."

The season opener, which sees Belinda abducted by alien robots and taken to their homeworld, is most definitely full-on sci-fi – with a retrofuturist flavour. A couple of '50s SF movies were important touchstones. "One of the references in the script that Russell flagged was *This Island Earth* and *Forbidden Planet*," Sims says. "The robo chamber is like a love letter to *Forbidden Planet*, because that was an inspiration to me as a kid, and we love the colours. We literally looked at how those sets were put together, what they were composed of, and how they shot them."

Said 1956 classic features one of sci-fi's most iconic robot designs. "We went through a lot of iterations of robots," Sims continues, "and Robby the Robot – or bits of Robby the Robot – appeared in different bits of robots through those iterations." Sims also looked back at previous Whoniverse bots, like those in "Dinosaurs On A Spaceship" and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*' "The Empty Planet". Part of the brief was to make them "pristine" and "very graphic", Sims explains. "I would have naturally tried to age the robots. But Russell was very clear he wanted minimal amounts of that."

When it came to the robots' spaceship, the adventures of a certain pilot of the future were an influence. "I've got an affinity with *Dan Dare* comics from *Eagle*," Sims says, "because I grew up reading my dad's collection. So that kind of '40s/'50s spaceship design is in there. And I think Russell might have written that he wanted it to be a *Tintin*-esque spaceship, so we looked at that. Initially it was red, then I thought



Choosing colours for one's robots is *such* a chore...

Going full 1950s design with the spaceship.

we should try different colours. We tried a blue one, because we may have had blue robots. Then I tried the yellow one with red markings on it, and Russell loved that."

Episode two, meanwhile, features a fascinating character: the fully-animated Mr Ring-A-Ding. In developing his look, the production team took a dual path, with both animators Framestore and design studio Painting Practice (who have offices at Bad Wolf Studios, *Who*'s home) pitching in.

"Framestore did the lion's share of the character development on that, and we also did some in-house," Sims explains. "So we had two wonderful first iterations of Mr Ring-A-Ding, and by a narrow margin Russell and the team preferred the Framestore one."

"A lot of time was spent working out whether he should have a flower with a face on it, if he should have a bowler hat and how

"With every brief we've had, we've pushed it as far as we possibly can"

big it was, or was it a boater – the subtle nuances of what made him Mr Ring-A-Ding. I can't remember what specifically was written in the script, but certainly he had a pig nose and a blue face.

"Then in conversation we referenced *Felix The Cat* and old *Popeye* cartoons, and [1928 Mickey Mouse short] *Steamboat Willie* and all the very first seminal cartoon work. There's nods throughout that episode to all kinds of styles of animation that people have a lot of affection for."

From Sims's perspective, the character also brings to mind a far more recent animated series. "To me, in some places, it's evocative of *Ren & Stimpy*. And there are moments throughout the episode where you go: 'Oh my word! That wasn't expected. That wasn't *Doctor Who* – or is it *Doctor Who*?'

"So there are things that are brand new that I don't think anyone will have seen in *Doctor Who* before. There's all sorts of surprises like that."

SHROOM

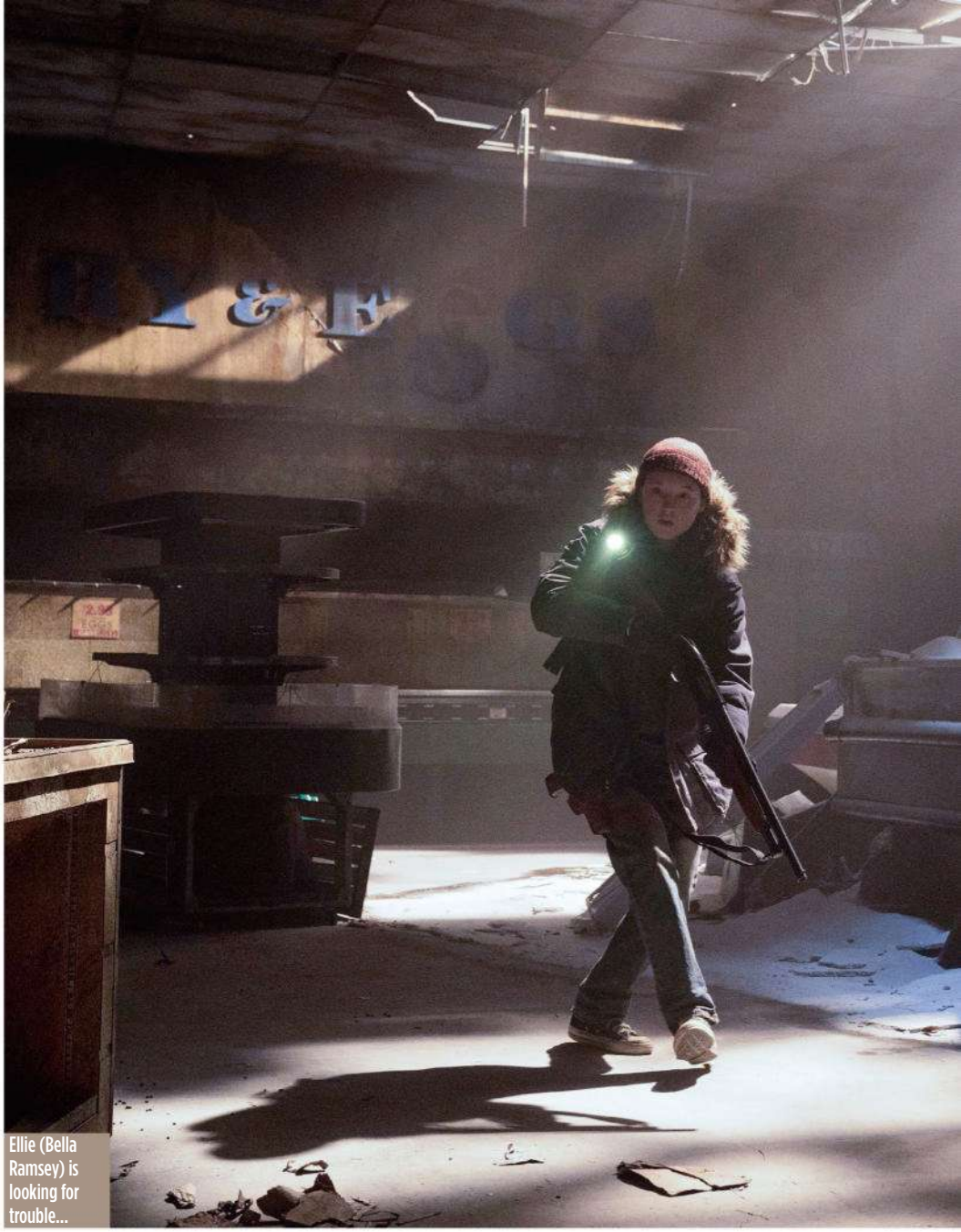
THE SECOND SEASON OF THE LAST OF US IS ABOUT TO BE UNLEASHED ACROSS THE GLOBE! PEDRO PASCAL (WHO PLAYS JOEL), BELLA RAMSEY (ELLIE), GABRIEL LUNA (TOMMY), KAITLYN DEVER (ABBY), ISABELA MERCED (DINA) AND YOUNG MAZINO (JESSE) JOIN FORCES WITH CO-SHOWRUNNERS CRAIG MAZIN AND NEIL DRUCKMANN FOR A NO-HOLDS-BARRED DISCUSSION AT SXSW IN AUSTIN, TEXAS ON EVERYTHING FROM SPORES AND STUNTS TO SHROOMS AND SERAPHITE SCARS

WORDS: **ADAM TANSWELL**

How would you describe season two?
Craig Mazin: Thematically, the second season is about evolution and change. Ellie is growing up and she is changing. The town of Jackson is also growing up. It's expanding. It's taking in refugees. It's changing. The outside is changing, too.

How does the second season compare to the first?
Neil Druckmann: In the first season, we followed Joel and Ellie as they went up against these other communities – whether it was David's group or Kansas City. Now, they've settled in Jackson. It's become their home and there's a love there for a community. We start getting into tribalism in season two and we start to see some other factions. What happens when you're going against another group and you don't see the humanity in them? How far will that take you, especially when they hurt someone you love?

The Seraphites and the Wolves are two new factions that have been spotted in the trailers. What can you tell us about them?
CM: Anyone who's played the game knows about these two factions. The Wolves is just a way of pronouncing WLF, which is the Washington Liberation Front. This is a militarised group in Seattle. What we know about the Seraphites from the trailer is they appear to be somewhat agrarian. They all have these interesting scars on their cheeks that are clearly deliberately there, including on a kid. Then the question is, "Who is the bad guy?" We see a Seraphite in chains, who's being beaten. We also see Seraphites running through the woods chasing somebody. That is part of what we dig into in season two. →


Ellie (Bella Ramsey) is looking for trouble...

What can you tease about the escalation of the infected?
CM: It was important to us to always move the ball forward with the infected. It's not just a question of more, but something else.
ND: There's an escalation in the numbers and types of infected, but there's also an escalation of the vector of how this thing spreads. In season one, we had this new thing that wasn't in the game – these tendrils that spread. That was one form. In one shot in the new trailer, there are things in the air...
CM: Yes, spores are back. They're back!

Where do we find Joel and Ellie in season two? It's five years later, but a scene in the trailer suggests that not all is rosy...
Bella Ramsey: Obviously, their relationship has changed a little. They're not best of friends, which is quite sad.
Pedro Pascal: Five years later, they are in a different place – but I think this is a very relatable fissure in relationships between parent and child, or between anyone you love. I don't know... it's fucking heartbreaking.

Catherine O'Hara joins the cast as Joel's therapist, Gail. How does Joel handle therapy?
PP: Well, it's a big load. His therapist deserves high pay. I have a spoiler for you... I pay for therapy with marijuana. I just give it away. I get her high and tell her my problems!

What's Catherine O'Hara like to work with?
PP: I know I go around kissing a lot of butts, but I'm such a little fangirl. The thing about Catherine O'Hara is that I've seen her in absolutely everything, so it was like working with Obama. On top of that, she is known so well for comedy – but I get to do a dramatic scene with her, so it is a bucket list tick for which I am indebted to Neil and Craig for the rest of my life.

Jeffrey Wright plays Isaac in season two, which is a role he voiced in the videogame. Was he quick to sign up?
ND: Jeffrey Wright is awesome. The fact that he was willing to come back and play this role again... I mean, we got a glimpse of him in the game, but now we get to see a lot more of how he became Isaac. I'm saying too much. I'll stop. With the show, there are all these beautiful opportunities to find new avenues, new angles and new relationships, as well as a better understanding of who these people are.

Eugene, played by Joe Pantoliano, is a character fans never see in the videogame. Why is he fleshed out in the show?
CM: We try as much as we can to reward people who play the game. If we have an idea for a character and there is somebody we can connect back to, why shouldn't we? I mean, I like staying inside of that world as much as I can. We create new characters, like Gail, but if there's a space that somebody like Eugene can occupy, then why not? And if you can get Joe Pantoliano, you're done.

Jesse is a new character in season two. How would you describe him?
Young Mazino: I like to think Jesse's cool, calm and collected under pressure, but he gets tested to some extremes and limits. Also, can you be cool, calm and collected in the presence of love or in the absence of it? Jesse is a stalwart. He will do whatever he can to protect this community and the people he cares about.

What about Dina and her connection with Ellie in the story?
Isabela Merced: You'll just have to see in the show. You know, Bella is very special to me and it was not hard to act like I'm falling in love with her.

Joel (Pedro Pascal) is now in therapy. But at what cost?

CM: Our very first shot [for season two] was a scene where Dina comes to visit Ellie. It was Izzy's first scene and it was our first time looking at Isabela and Bella together. It was our first time seeing the Dina/Ellie chemistry. What was going to happen? I didn't know – but on take one, it was instantly there. I mean, the

PICTURES: HBO. STOCK IMAGES: SHRIMPGRAPHIC. HIHOBR/GETTY

Maria (Rutina Wesley) and Tommy (Gabriel Luna).

Dina (Isabela Merced) and Ellie take a load off.

Tommy and Bella take a horse ride in the snow.

relief and the joy I felt. It reminded me of the first time I saw Pedro and Bella in a scene together.

Abby looms large in *The Last Of Us* lore. What makes Kaitlyn Dever perfect for this iconic role?

CM: Kaitlyn was within *The Last Of Us* DNA. When she was younger, Neil and [videogame developer] Naughty Dog were contemplating making a movie and they talked to her about playing Ellie. By the time the show rolled around, she was no longer convincingly 14. For Abby, we never had to question whether or not Kaitlyn was an amazing actor. We've seen her in everything. She's incredible. We just wanted to know, "Do you want to do this?"

How does it feel to bring Abby to life?

Kaitlyn Dever: These are big shoes to fill. Or boots, I should say. She wears big boots. Stepping into a world that is so deeply, deeply loved is nerve-wracking and anxiety-inducing. I knew we were going to be doing a lot of stunts and a lot of physical stuff. I knew it was going to be a lot, but I was really looking forward to it because it's not something I've done before. It was intimidating for sure.

PP: I can't believe that you had no experience of stunts. You came in and you slayed.

What was the most intimidating aspect of season two for you, Gabriel?

Gabriel Luna: I'd probably echo what Kaitlyn said because there were a lot of additional physical requirements. This time, I was there in the winter and -20 Celsius is no joke. I tried to get myself in good shape, but Craig said to me, "No, man. You're old. You're supposed to be out of shape." He gave me this blank cheque to eat cookies.

Tommy is a father in season two, which is a change to the game's storyline. What does this mean for your character?

GL: When you have a child, your constitution becomes that much more solidified. It crystallises what you're about and what you care about and who's important, so it fills him with purpose. It fills him with the strength he needs to help his wife, his brother, his surrogate niece and everyone else keep the city safe.

What's it like to wander around a set where there are lots of clickers?

GL: I was walking down the street in Jackson and there were a bunch of them strewn about the floor. Some of them were dummies and some of them were people, but it was just this big infected cuddle puddle. I asked, "Hey, are you guys good?" And only two heads came up, "Yeah, we're just relaxing."

IM: I'll walk out of the green room and it'll look like the "Thriller" music video. They're practising their moves, but it's not scary. They just look like they're dancing.

YM: I think the Cordyceps are terrifying when the tendrils poke out of their mouths. When you see them outside the green room, just sitting at a table and they're tired, that's sometimes even more terrifying.

> **"That world is louder and it is more dangerous – and we have really dug in"**

Is it scarier to watch the infected on the small screen or to engage with a cast member in prosthetics on set?

KD: Honestly, both are scary. It's definitely terrifying working with actors in the prosthetics and the stakes feel very high – but watching it back is probably even more intense. I'm watching it back going, "I can't believe that I was actually doing that." It's unreal.

How much action can audiences expect to see in season two?

ND: In the game, we talk about how Jackson had these attacks – whether it was marauders or the infected. In season two, we'll show you exactly what's at stake. Not for the individuals, but for our entire community – and it escalates from there. People ask me, "Is season two better than season one?" I reply, "It's crazier. It's a wild roller coaster ride." I mean, I love them both – but there's some pretty intense stuff that you don't even see in the trailers.

CM: This story is broader. It has many more characters and many more lenses to look through. There's a whole new environment that we introduce too. That world is louder and it is more dangerous – and we have really dug in.

The Last Of Us is on Sky and NOW from 14 April.

Dropp

ing By

Christopher Landon takes his horror to a new level in Drop

WORDS: **ROBBIE DUNLOP**

SOMETIMES THE BEST ideas come from the most unlikely sources. The lightbulb moment for the very up-to-the-minute premise of Blumhouse and Platinum Dunes' *Drop* was a series of anonymous messages received by producer Cameron Fuller and his family on their phones during dinner at a restaurant.

"They were totally innocent, nothing creepy," director Christopher Landon assures *SFX*. "But Cameron spent the whole night trying to figure out who was doing it, and he never solved the mystery. He felt there was a movie idea in there."

Fuller set the wheels in motion, tasking *Truth Or Dare* and *Fantasy Island* writers Jillian Jacobs and Chris Roach to develop a story geared around AirDrops – media sent wirelessly from one mobile device to another within close range. While Landon found himself drawn to a "unique, fun and suspenseful" script, an initial approach to him to direct coincided with preparatory work on *Scream 7*.

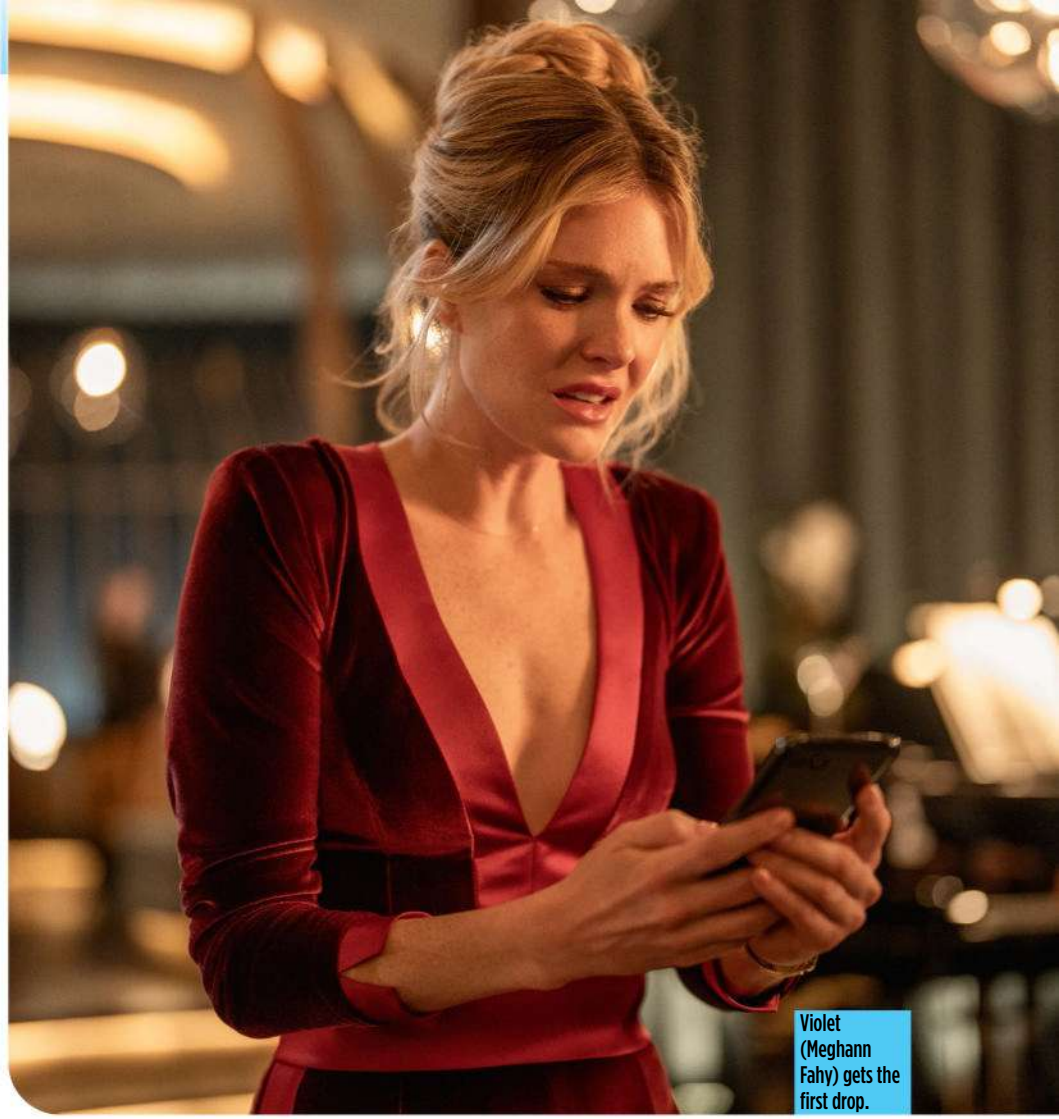
"There was a point where I actually got kind of sad because I felt, oh man, I may not actually get to make it if they don't feel like waiting for me. They might want to make it now, and then they'll have to give it to another director. And then fate had other plans," he sighs, referencing his departure from the horror sequel. "And so I got to make this movie, and it feels like the movie I was supposed to make."

A DROP OF THE HARD STUFF

Landon has gone back to his roots, crafting a modern Hitchcockian thriller that harks back to his first horror script, 2007's *Disturbia*, itself a riff on Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. While he is now best known for an array of colourful slashers including *Happy Death Day* and *Freaky*, the filmmaker says that he always likes to try and challenge himself, and *Drop* felt like an opportunity to flex some different muscles.

"And in some way," he continues, "to step out of the horror-comedy space a little bit. You can start to pigeonhole yourself, and then that's all people want and expect from you. This was a really nice way for me to do something that was still in my wheelhouse, but just a little different."

Drop follows widowed mother Violet (Meghann Fahy) on a date from hell, when someone at the opulent high-rise restaurant Palate starts bombarding her with threatening drops. Starting with trivial requests, the situation quickly escalates when she is ordered to murder Henry, her photographer date. If she doesn't or she tells anyone what's going on, her young son and babysitter will be killed.



Violet (Meghann Fahy) gets the first drop.

"You can start to pigeonhole yourself, and then that's all people expect from you"

But who is her tormentor? Could it be the waiter on his first shift? The lone diner waiting for his sister? The friendly bartender? Or even Henry? Landon and the writers have gone all out to keep audiences guessing.

"It required us to do a lot of heavy lifting, both in script and execution, because you're constantly trying to control where the audience is looking and who they're looking at," Landon explains. "There was definitely a lot of effort put into that. Hopefully it pays off."

Meghann Fahy was his first choice for Violet, having been impressed by her performance as Daphne in *The White Lotus*. "She and I got together after she read the script and we both just felt an immediate connection," he says. "We felt very much in sync about what we wanted for the movie, what we wanted for Violet. She brings a certain kind of grounded, relatable likeability that is really rare."

Landon put a lot of thought into the opulent design of Palate, which he regards as its own character in the film. "If you look at the set, you'll see a lot of gold and a lot of gold bars around. The idea there was to make the space start to feel like a gilded cage. It was just beautiful. It was a marvel.

"It was a technical marvel too because it was a very large set and had to accommodate a ton of people. It was built about 16 feet off the ground. That way we could move very big equipment and gear through a large tunnel that was underneath it. We could move a crane from one side of the restaurant to the other."

Evoking Hitchcock's classic *Rope*, most of *Drop* plays out in real-time. Landon feels this aspect helps the pacing by creating a "sense of real propulsion.

"Furthermore," he continues, "we had the luxury of shooting the movie basically in order. It was especially nice for the actors because they always knew where they were emotionally in the story – we were marching forward all the time as opposed to bouncing around, which is what you typically do on a film."

But unlike Hitchcock's classic thriller, *Drop* isn't entirely confined to one location. As the trailer shows, at one point the action shifts to the city streets for some high-speed car action. "It was an all-hands-on-deck

PICTURES: BERNARD WALSH/UNIVERSAL PICTURES. STOCK IMAGES: TURKAN RAHIMLI/GETTY

Director Christopher Landon gets hands-on.

kind of sequence that we spent weeks and weeks building," Landon says. "A lot of time sitting around a bunch of toy cars on the floor which is how we always end up figuring everything out. Especially on a movie like this, which has such a limited budget. I think a lot of people are used to big Hollywood movies with giant budgets and you see a lot of action and car chases in those movies, but we're obviously having to be a lot more thrifty and nimble."

Landon describes filming this thrilling Michael Bay-esque scene (Bay is one of the producers) as "a combination of being unbearably tedious and also very exciting". But he picks out the "crazier" moments as those he enjoyed shooting most. Moments he doesn't want to spoil...

"The truth is," he adds, "I had an amazing cast and the best crew, so every day was a joy. Even right down to all of our background extras who came every day and spent the whole day with us over and over again. It just felt like a family, it was a joy to work with them."

Let's talk sequels. A veteran of the *Paranormal Activity* franchise, Landon has writing credits on five follow-up films. They include 2014's *The Marked Ones*, which he also directed. But don't fool yourself that making a found footage movie is simply point and shoot.

"Oh, hell no!", he laughs. "I always told people that writing those movies was a thankless task because the whole point of them was to sort of create the illusion that they were real. So often people, even people within the industry, really didn't think that the movies were written, like there wasn't an actual script. Which I thought was really funny. So you make these movies and people would say, 'Oh it's so easy, you improvise and do a bunch of stuff.' I was like, 'No, there's a whole design there!'"

The sixth and most recent sequel – 2021's *Next Of Kin* – could be Landon's last foray into the franchise. "But you can never say never," he insists. "If the right thing comes along, for some reason, or I'm struck by some idea, I might consider it. But probably not."

While his own time loop slasher *Happy Death Day* and its sequel *Happy Death Day 2 U* enjoyed great critical acclaim, a much anticipated third entry is stuck in limbo. "It's been an interesting journey because both movies were financially very successful, so I think it's left us and a lot of fans scratching their heads as to why we weren't allowed to make a third," he muses.

"But I don't control the purse strings, I don't call those shots. That's entirely up to Blumhouse and Universal, if they have an appetite or interest in it."

Landon reveals that, should he be given the word, he has an outline for a third film ready to go. "I didn't write the script because I never want to count my chickens and get ahead of myself. But I was ready to go and start writing this, but then it was sort of like, it was weird.

"We had a lot of fits and spurts in terms of maybe we'll do it, and at one point they talked about it becoming a three-part event thing for [streaming service] Peacock, which was kind of weird. I was like, 'Alriiiiight! Whatever it takes.' But then it went away and that was the last we ever heard of it – which was years ago."

Admitting to bad luck with sequels, Landon is a firm believer in original content. He would like to concentrate on original movies going forward rather than revisit older ones, and that may include any of the scripts he's currently writing himself or developing with others.

"I'm very cautious now and kind of wait to see which ends up feeling the most exciting, the most personal to me," he says.

In the meantime, he is looking forward to *Drop* dropping into cinemas. "It's such an audience experience – it's so much better to see it with a big group of people, who you get to listen to reacting to everything," he enthuses. "I'm very excited for the movie to come out."

Drop is in cinemas from 11 April.

Is Henry (Brandon Sklenar) a bit shifty...?

Queer Fear

Horror has a huge LGBTQ+ following but the studios still have their issues...

Many of Landon's horror movies feature LGBTQ+ supporting characters and *Drop* is no exception. But can he see a horror movie with a gay lead coming to cinemas any time soon? "Oh, fuck no!", laughs the filmmaker, who is gay himself.

"Here's a great example, and I won't name names. I wrote a movie based on a very big and popular IP that had a gay lead, and that was the thing that stopped it from getting made. [The studio] just couldn't deal with it; they were worried that it would alienate half the audience or half our country [the US] in particular.

"So it didn't move forward. It was a shame as it was actually one of the best scripts I've ever written. I was insanely proud of it, and it would be a great movie. But until people stop worrying about what everybody thinks, and they stop catering to the lowest common denominator for money, those things won't change. The glass ceiling is still there and it's not going anywhere."

Does he hope to be the one to smash that glass? "Of course, I'm always trying to push that. It's not my agenda, but it shouldn't matter – and that was the bummer of that particular experience."

Keep Spinning

SFX GOES BEHIND THE SCENES ON THE WHEEL OF TIME TO WITNESS JUST HOW BIG THE SHOW'S THIRD SEASON IS

WORDS:
JACK SHEPHERD

Nukâka Coster-Waldau, Madeleine Madden and Salóme Gunnarsdóttir.

Moiraine (Rosamund Pike) and Lan (Daniel Henney).

Julie van Leeuwen and Josha Stradowski.

WHEN *SFX* JOINS *THE Wheel Of Time*'s showrunner Rafe Judkins on a Zoom call, we're both wistful for the South African sun. Almost a year ago, we visited the series' Cape Town set to explore the pirate-invested harbour of Tanchico and cavernous caves of the Aiel Waste (read our set report in the last issue). In almost every aspect – costume, make-up, set design – the attention to detail was exquisite, every department working at the top of their game.

"Everyone was contributing their piece and making it better," says Judkins, who, as we speak, is deep into completing season three. The result, he continues, is "better than what we put on the page".

Those involved with the show's third season attest to it being the most ambitious set of episodes yet, and much of that comes down to the scope of what's being adapted: not only elements of the third book, but the fourth and fifth too.

Anyone who's read Robert Jordan's 14-volume book series will anticipate visiting a vast array of locations, but none perhaps as interesting as the Aiel Waste, the desert land home to the Aiel people, famous to outsiders – known as "wetlanders" – for their fighting skills. At the conclusion of the second season, one of the Aiel, Aviendha, comes to believe that our hero Rand, the Dragon Reborn, is the "Car'a'carn", a prophetic man destined to lead the Aiel.

The season sees Aviendha and Rand – along with Rosamund Pike's witchy Moiraine and her trusted Warder al'Lan Mandragoran – set out on the long, dangerous journey through the Aiel Waste.

"I loved the Aiel in the books, it's one of those things that you read and become obsessed with," Judkins says. His team devoted a huge amount of resources to bringing the Aiel world to life, which was partly why they filmed half of the season in South Africa. "We went to the border with Namibia for months to shoot, we built [the settlement] Cold Rocks from scratch, we made hundreds of costumes to bring these people to life. We're really doing the Aiel justice."

ON THE ROCKS

Back in 2024, when walking *SFX* around the Cold Rocks set, production designer Ondřej Nekvasil put into perspective just how much planning has gone into bringing the Aiel to screen.

There's a modest-sized area almost hidden away that's filled with plants. The Aiel, he explains, would have to eat something, so Nekvasil's crew created a complex system of tubes that could water the vegetation to grow food. However, creating this system posed a question: how would the wood be sourced in the blisteringly hot desert?

"Everything the Aiel have, like bamboo sticks, has to be brought and scavenged from somewhere else," he says. "Because of that, they wouldn't have doors to their houses. They wouldn't have windows. There was a really long process of discussing everything. The layout of the city, how the rocks would look. Everything."

For costume designer Sharon Gilham, clothing the Aiel posed an equal challenge. "In the books, they wear misshapen, ugly skirts and I was thinking, 'This is so boring!' But it's absolutely not," she says, showing *SFX* around a trailer filled with fantastical costumes of all shapes, sizes and colours.

"They live in an environment where constraints come in. They have to be able to travel and move in their costumes. Then there are different clans and I needed to give each one an identity. I had this idea where, if somebody travelled to the wetlands, they are going to this place where there are trees and they might find a leaf, and that could be a really important artefact to bring back, and that might be reflected in the patterns or shapes on their clothing."

> **"We really want to do right by the heart of the books and bring it to a much wider audience"**

Although Judkins admits the show does not have the same budget as some other fantasy shows, he says every penny is stretched in order to fully realise Jordan's fantastical world. There is, however, no getting around the fact that he and his fellow writers have changed a significant amount of *The Wheel Of Time*'s story – not necessarily character arcs, but

Natasha O'Keeffe as Lanfear: trés chic.

certainly where characters are physically, and which characters interact with each other.

Take, for example, Mat Cauthon, who this season goes to the city of Tanchico with his friend Nynaeve to find out more about what's happening with magic-channelling women the Aes Sedai. However, in the books, Mat follows Rand to the Aeil Waste. Since *SFX* reported this information, there has been intense discussion online. Reddit forums have likewise questioned why the new season incorporates events from multiple books rather than directly adapting the third.

"You just have to accept that you can't do everything that's in the books, and that's not what we're trying to do," Judkins says. "There are millions and millions of huge fans of these books and like 20,000 people who post on Reddit, so it's not representative of the fanbase. In our current time, you have to be careful not to be swayed by Reddit.

"It's a wonderful audience and we love the people who engage with the books that much, but we really want to do right by the heart and spine of the books and bring it to a much wider audience. I'm always careful to listen to what everyone says, but you have to do what's best for the adaptation at the end of the day. If you try to make something that everyone likes, no one will love it, and we're trying to make something that people love."

Justine Juel Gillmer, a writer and executive producer on the series, expands a little more on how they've gone about adapting the story. "Any time you approach an adaptation, you have to look at the time it was written in and the time that we live in now," she says. "Everyone in the →

Community elder Bair: she's all wise and that.

EVIL RISES

Natasha O'Keeffe returns as Lanfear, servant of the Shadow

At the end of last season, the Forsaken were unleashed and your character was confronted by Moghedien. How's Lanfear feeling?

She's had to go off and have a think about what she's going to do now after all the mistakes they've made. Moghedien is at the very centre – she'll be doing something shadowy in true Moghedien form, so Lanfear's having to very quickly make allies and figure out whether what other people are saying is true. I'm not speaking the truth sometimes either. I'm doing my dream-walking thing too, which is mainly where you see Lanfear this season.

How does the Forsaken leader Ismael's death impact her? She was his number two.

This is part of the issue she has with the Forsaken. Each has their own ego and their own agenda. They're not "one for all". Lanfear's having to get them all on board. To be on her own and powerful would be the dream. Then there's Ran, and she wants to be with him. She's working that love magic, but it's not always working. How we left it last season, we're not on talking terms, shall we say. It's very clear that she works on her own. She's at her most dangerous when she comes out of the shadows and you don't know what her next move is.

Stepping into costume must give you a real sense of character...

We've got the crème de la crème of make-up, hair and costume. Every single time I go in for a fitting it's like Christmas Day. When you're doing a script read-through with everyone else, dressed as yourself, I'm suddenly very, very quiet, and it's quite hard to step into it. But as soon as you have these epic costumes on, it's amazing.

LEADER OF THE TWO RIVERS

Perrin's heading home. Marcus Rutherford on his character's epic journey

What journey is Perrin on in this season?

Perrin was the person who is quite happy to be in the background. He's had guilt and trauma, so he's been happy to let Rand take the shine. But he naturally starts to find himself in positions where people are looking to him for direction or leadership. That's where we find him in season three. He can't be that person who keeps his head down in the corner any more. He has to make decisions, not only for himself but on behalf of other people.

He goes back to the Two Rivers – back to his home.

There's something quite cathartic about going back to that location. We were filming [in Prague] in 2019, and going back was something. A make-up artist showed me a picture of myself from season one and it was so weird seeing how much me and the character have changed.

Do you still learn about Perrin from the books or does it feel like he's your own?

I had such a stark difference right at the start because we had [Perrin's wife] Laila, who's not in the books, and she died. It added depth. But what's amazing about this season is so much is from the fourth book. Some of the dialogue is in the script and it was amazing to go through the book and pick stuff out and be like, "Ah, that's that!" It's chronologically a bit different, but there's something really lovely about what's on the page in the books coming through the scripts. You can feel Robert Jordan guiding it.

Can you describe the scope of this season?

Some of the stuff this season, whether it's the stunts or battles, or anything like that, just seems to be going up a notch. It has to get bigger and more expansive. It's what the books do.

Rhuarc (Björn Landberg) strikes a manly pose.

Aviendha (Ayoola Smart) and Rand.

Aviendha and Bair having a bit of a barney.

writers' room came to this with an idea of what they loved about the books and what they thought was important. Then we asked, 'What is the modern lens that we see this through?' Because there is a difference between a book published in the early '90s and right now.

"Rafe and I share a brain with this stuff. The important stuff was the plethora of really interesting female characters, hundreds of them, and how they were allowed to run the gamut of the female experience.

"We also looked at what's important across the board, like casting. It was really important to modernise, to make the world of *The Wheel Of Time*, which is technically a future world, reflect either our world or the world that we will have in the future."

Yes, despite its aesthetic, *The Wheel Of Time* takes place in both the distant future and the distant past. Each age is another turn of the eponymous wheel, going forever on. This idea is key to a huge sequence in season three which sees Rand revisit his ancestors' lives, with Josha Stradowski portraying Rand and all his ancestors.

"It was a gift to do that," he tells *SFX*. "That process of working together with the make-up department, costume director, and writers, just everyone, it was so creative. It was really an ambitious plan to do those ancestors. I played one called Jonai, who was in his sixties, and it took seven hours to get into him."

The scene, which takes place in the city of Rhuidean, is one that Judkins anticipates will be a stand-out. "We built a new camera this season just for episode four," he says. "The director, Thomas Napper, had this idea for how to do it, and so we built a camera to do it. We're taking a big swing with that episode.

"It's really weird and we're going for it, and everyone

Atom Uniacke and an aged Josha Stradowski.

STOCK IMAGES: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

Whatever's just happened, it's obviously not good.

Rhuarc's walking tours aren't a *great* deal of fun.

> **"The work that everyone's done on season three is the best we've ever done"**

brought their A-game. I haven't seen anything like Rhuidean on TV before. I hadn't read anything like it when I read it in the books. Fans will be blown away."

The word that once again comes to mind is ambitious. "I want the world to feel huge," says Judkins, "but I never want to forget our characters in it. One of my favourite scenes this season is a two-hander with Rand and Egwene finally talking about their relationship.

"It's preceded and followed by these massive [magical] channelling sequences. But that scene holds just as much weight as these battles. That's when our show is at its best; when our character scenes are just as ambitious in what they're trying to do as our big battle scenes and our big world-building scenes."

This season in particular holds added weight for the showrunner. "Book four is when the books really exploded in popularity," he says. "They were popular and people enjoyed them, then book four was a worldwide phenomenon. The show has the real possibility of doing that too. The work that everyone's done on season three is the best work we've ever done on the show. It really holds up against anything else in this space on TV.

"What I like about *Wheel Of Time*, the book series, and why I was excited about adapting it from the beginning, was that it gets better and better as it goes, like how the best television gets better and better as it goes.

"I'm really hopeful that we can get better every year."

The Wheel Of Time is on Prime Video.

A HERO IS BORN

Dónal Finn talks returning as Mat Cauthon after his heroic season two moment

How did blowing the Horn of Heroes at the end of last season affect him?

Within *The Wheel Of Time*, there's this greater sense that there's a pattern set out for you and that things are predetermined for the characters. I don't think Mat had envisaged a lot for his future and was silently dealing with that. But when he's pushed into that discovery, that he's a leader, it turns his sense of perspective of himself on his head. He has to reevaluate his own sense of worth and what he might actually contribute to the pattern.

The character was played by Barney Harris in season one. Do you feel more ownership of the character now?

The fans have been incredibly supportive and accommodating to a new face in the role, but we were filming season three before season two had been released. I had more time to invest and more space to play with the character this season. At the top of season three, he's in a very different place. The way he dresses, the objects that he carries, the things that he wants are all different. I was figuring out how to play him in this new set of circumstances and that expanded my understanding of the character.

He spends a lot of time with Nynaeve this season. What makes that relationship so interesting?

She's a fundamental influence on Mat's value systems. She's an incredibly principled person, and while sometimes they don't see eye to eye, Mat knows there's a value in the way that Nynaeve sees the world. Nynaeve has a very strong sense of identity. There's a consistency of character to that and that is easy for Mat to trust, because he knows what he will get with Nynaeve. Mat's own identity, his sense of self, is changing. He's vulnerable. He's lacking a support system and Nynaeve is there for him.

REVOLUTION ROAD

THE SHOWRUNNERS OF THE HANDMAID'S TALE DISCUSS HOW THEY'VE TURNED MARGARET ATWOOD'S CLASSIC BOOK INTO A RALLYING CALL FOR OUR TIMES

WORDS: **TARA BENNETT**

AH, WHAT A STRANGE JOURNEY Canadian author Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction classic *The Handmaid's Tale* has taken since it was first published in 1985. A satire of the religious right policies fomented during President Ronald Reagan's administration in the United States, Atwood's narrative was the ultimate "What if?" thought experiment about what the country might look like if those policies incited a hostile takeover of democracy and the US became a totalitarian patriarchy called Gilead. Sobering, but surely impossible... (Insert nervous laugh).

Fast-forward to 2016 when Bruce Miller (*The 4400*) and executive producer Warren Littlefield (*Fargo*) were given a straight-to-series order for *The Handmaid's Tale*, starring Elisabeth Moss as June Osborne/Offred, for Hulu. That was just seven months before Donald Trump and his ultra-right wing Republican party won the election for the White House... (Now insert slightly more hysterical laugh).

During that four-year term, the series and its stark portrayal of the roadmap to the Gilead government became a lightning rod for women and civil liberty advocates, with their protests often featuring women wearing the red handmaid uniforms seen in the series.

Life continues to imitate art as *The Handmaid's Tale* returns this month for its sixth and final season, a little over two months into the second Trump presidential regime, which seemingly used Gilead as a partial primer for their Project 2025 policies... (No laughter to be found).

JOURNEY'S END

The series' finale season showrunners Yahlin Chang and Eric Tuchman have both been part of the writers' room since season two and season one respectively, and are incredibly aware that their show has become a raw watch →

for many who observe the events in their narrative with abject terror.

"We're living in this world as people, so obviously we're feeling the same things other people are feeling," Tuchman acknowledges to *SFX* about their shared feelings with the audience. "You look at Margaret Atwood in 1985 and she had this incredible crystal ball somehow. But because she's such a remarkable storyteller, she just extrapolated how things might happen if this were to happen, and they felt very organic and authentic. And what do you know? You could use her novel as a 'How to' manual if you wanted to."

Since their version of the show has gone far beyond Atwood's prose, it raises the question of whether the writers have felt compelled to draw from the real world for inspiration? "For me as a writer, when I think about living in this world and working on the show, I really start with what's happening on the show for June, and the other characters," Tuchman says of their narrative North Star.

"Where is she in her journey? What are the challenges she's going to face? What are the obstacles? Then it becomes uncanny when it happens to be mirrored by what's going on in our country. So I personally don't look at the news and say, 'We have to make up a story that reflects that incident or that person's journey.' It really is starting with June's journey."

Max Minghella returns as Commander Nick Blaine.

Amanda Brugel, Samira Wiley and O-T Fagbenle.

> **"In this season, it's a now or never, do or die time for June and the characters"**

June has gone through a lot in five seasons, finally escaping Gilead to gain asylum in Canada, but losing her oldest daughter Hannah (Jordana Blake) to Gilead, and giving birth to Commander Nick Blaine's child (Max Minghella); she's escaped an assassination hit, and even formed an uneasy alliance with her former Gilead oppressor, Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski) to get to safety in Alaska. Having spent a lot of the show running for her life, this season finds June and others instead running towards revolution.

"Because this was the final season, this was really our chance to do everything we want. In some ways I see this season as a love letter to our fans and our hardcore viewers who have stuck with us through thick and thin," Chang says of tying up their storylines.

"Honestly, we all know that this show can be a hard watch sometimes. Often hopes are dashed and expectations are thwarted. So in this season I wanted it to be super-satisfying and rewarding for our fans, who are the best fans in the world. We also had the opportunity, because it's the final season, to really dabble in some wish fulfilment."

Tuchman concurs, adding, "What I've always loved about the show, that I wanted to make sure we infused in this season, is for people to draw from the courage and the strength and the resilience and the hope that June, and so many characters in the show, still cling to. That's what I think keeps people watching and coming back.

"In this season especially, it's a now or never, do or die time for June and the characters. They're reaching inflection points in their stories where they have to make choices that reveal who they really are. Do they have the courage and the bravery and the guts to do what needs to be done to take down this fascist regime?"

With Gilead attempting to present a softer face with enclaves like New Bethlehem, and seemingly less restrictive spaces to encourage economic trade and the return of asylum seekers, women who have escaped like June and Moira (Samira Wiley) understand that the rot needs to be snuffed out forever.

"Women in Gilead have been oppressed for so long. Even for the people who've gone out of Gilead, they are oppressed by the trauma of having been in that country," Chang says of the next stage of revolt. "I think we really felt that it was time for a revolution, and it was really a time for the oppressed people of Gilead, and our own oppressed characters, to fight

What now for Serena Joy (Yvonne Strahovski)?

STOCK IMAGES: GEENGRAPHY/GETTY

Ann Dowd as Aunt Lydia Clements: boo, hiss?

Moira Strand (Samira Wiley) sees through you.

back. This is really the season where the women, in particular, said, 'Enough! We've had enough. That's it. No more!' So you really can see our characters fighting back and fighting back strongly; to really take it to the man in Gilead."

Chang says she's grateful they've had six seasons of storytelling in which to show the realities of revolution and the failures along the road. "Our characters could hibernate for a while and lick their wounds, so we could really delve into the story in a very true and honest way of how traumatised they were, especially June, and how hard it is to work through that and to process that.

"All of that really helps to make her feel like a real person, so that we really earn the rebellion and the fighting back and the rebel cause. I feel like there would have been a great, great temptation in season one of the show to start with revolution.

"But what's great about taking our time with it is that we really invest in these people as real people, and not superheroes in a Marvel movie, because they're not," Chang continues. "They're just ordinary people, and ordinary people get beaten down, and then they have to deal with being beaten up.

"They don't put on a cape and start fighting right away, as we usually see in TV and movies. I think that it's that much more rewarding and satisfying because they are so real."

That means characters like Serena Joy, who has been karmically treated as she treated the handmaids in her life and yet made it to freedom, will also make human choices that tell the story of those women who are tempted by power in misogynist societies.

Tuchman says it's a testament to Yvonne Strahovski's performance across all six seasons that she's created such a compelling character, who could have been viewed as just a despicable villain. "For Serena, what's interesting about her is there is part of her that truly wants to make things right, to make amends for things that went wrong the first time.

"Her relationship with June has really made her realise that. There's a genuine part of her that wants to fix her mistakes and atone for her sins, and she believes that's what God wants for her. It's her 'calling' to do that. But there is also a part of Serena that's full of ego and hubris, so the temptation for her to once again become an influential voice is often hard to resist. We will see both sides of that Serena come into play this season, and it's a remarkable journey."

With 10 episodes to finish the story, there isn't any narrative from the book for the showrunners to service anymore, just their own invention. "We were always guided by Margaret as a beacon and a spirit guide," Chang says. "But everything, big story wise, had to be invented."

BALM IN GILEAD

However, Miller did hold onto a specific idea of how he wanted to end the series, which they've embraced for the finale.

"The narrative for the season builds a lot of momentum as we get near the end, and the more plot-driven ideas are resolved by the end of episode nine," Tuchman says. "The finale then becomes more of a classic *Handmaid's* episode, in its mood and vibe – which is certainly appropriate, given that Bruce created the show and established that tone in season one."

Chang says she's grateful that they've been able to write a series with such cultural impact that perhaps has become a roadmap of how to come back from the dark. "*The Handmaid's Tale* has been a cautionary tale since Margaret wrote it, and since the show came out I sometimes joke that we obviously failed being a cautionary tale writing during one Trump era and ending in another.

"Personally, I have found it extremely cathartic to work on this show during these years and during these dark times. I hope that this show, especially this season, revives in people the spirit to fight back and to do what you can to make things better."

The Handmaid's Tale is on Hulu and Disney+ from 8 April.

Brought THE SFX AUTHOR INTERVIEW To Book

NICHOLAS BINGE

Remembrance days: the bestselling novelist discusses his new thriller

Words by Jonathan Wright /// Portrait by Allys Elizabeth Photography

DEMENTIA IS THE CRUELLEST OF conditions. Not just for those enduring growing confusion and cognitive decline, but for their nearest and dearest too. This was something Nicholas Binge witnessed as his grandmother, May, became unmoored from the present because of Alzheimer's. For May's husband and partner of 70 years, Joe, this was a terrible experience.

"I watched the emotional toll that caring for her took on my grandfather," Binge says. "It wasn't just that she didn't recognise him, but that increasingly he no longer recognised her. He would say things like, 'This isn't the woman that I married any more,' but he'd still have this obvious duty and compulsion. He couldn't possibly hand the care of her over to anybody else, even though it was kind of breaking him physically."

Many can tell similar stories, and yet that doesn't make them any less frightening. And it was in part fear, says Binge, that led him to begin to write his remarkable new novel *Dissolution*. It was a way to face up to what had happened to Joe and May – and indeed to deal with his feelings over the dementia that had earlier gripped his grandmother Vera.

"The starting places for me when I'm thinking about what I want to write tend to be exploring things that I find quite terrifying or scary in real life," he says. Through this process, "fiction and narrative" become a way to reach an "understanding" of difficult subjects.

If this suggests *Dissolution* is a gloomy novel, that's misleading. Telling the story of Maggie and Stanley, a couple who've spent most of their lifetimes together, it functions as a mind-bending slipstream thriller where narratives corkscrew together and nothing is ever quite as it seems. With a plot that's initially driven by Maggie inhabiting Stanley's memories, a key theme is the slippery nature of what we think we know about the past.

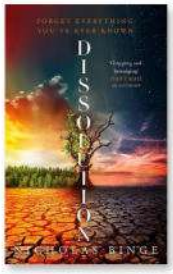
THE MEMORY CHEATS

"Pretty much all scientific thought agrees that our memories are not only hugely fallible but wildly subjective," Binge says. "We rethink backup memories. We change them to fit in with our emotions and narratives of how we feel. They are not objective reflections of reality, yet at the same time, for almost all of us, they are the way in which we construct reality, they're the way we understand the world."

All of which led Binge to what's arguably the book's most haunting question: what would seeing "crucial, pivotal events" in your life through the prism of another person's memories be like? As he interrogated this subject, Binge adds, he began to think about the idea, rooted in quantum mechanics, that "things need to be observed to exist". Apply this to time and you arrive at another disquieting question: "If our memories change, does time itself change?"

It says much about the quality of Binge's writing that his answers to these questions – or perhaps meditations might be a better word, in that you'd be insanely brave to claim to have solved such puzzles – never overpower a novel that also deals with how love changes over time while, if you're lucky, enduring.

Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind, Michel Gondry and Charlie Kaufman's study of two people finding a way back to each other, was an "atmospheric touchstone" when Binge started writing. He adds that you can also read the book as an "ode" to his wife and "the relationship that we've developed over the years".



BIODATA

From **Singapore**

Greatest Hits
Binge's first novel, *Professor Everywhere* (2020) was published by Hong Kong imprint Proverse. Following *Ascension* and *Dissolution*, his next book will be the SF police procedural *Extremity*.

Random Fact
Academy Award-nominated scriptwriter and showrunner Eric Heisserer (*Arrival*, the Netflix adaptation of *Shadow And Bone*) is adapting the book as his next big-screen project.

ROAD FROM SINGAPORE

Dissolution has been keenly anticipated because of the success of Binge's second book, *Ascension* (2023), about the sudden appearance of a mountain in the Pacific, and which Stephen King called "a five-star horror novel". As so often happens, though, overnight success followed long years of sending manuscripts to agents and publishers.

Going further back, while he "grew up with two very English parents", Binge was born in Singapore, where his parents taught at an international school. Later, the family moved to Switzerland. "I didn't live in this country until I was an adult," he notes. Later, Binge himself worked abroad, teaching at an international school in Hong Kong.

Then came China's clampdown on the protest movement in the territory. "We were living there with a one-year-old son," he remembers, "and there were relatively central streets in Hong Kong that were almost war zones for a period of time. Tear gas, people throwing explosives, it got pretty hairy for a while."

Even working at an international school, he says, there was a creeping sense of the authorities exerting pressure. Regretfully, Binge and his wife decided it was time to come home and moved to Edinburgh, where he worked at a private school.

The success of *Ascension* means Binge can now focus on his writing. He's still not sure exactly why the book connected, but he's immensely grateful. It taught him that he could be "experimental" yet still find a readership. "That was really life-affirming," he says, as he looks forward to getting still "weirder and more ambitious" in the future.

Dissolution is published by Harper Voyager on 27 March.

“I tend to explore things that I find quite terrifying or scary in real life”

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APRIL 2025

Reviews

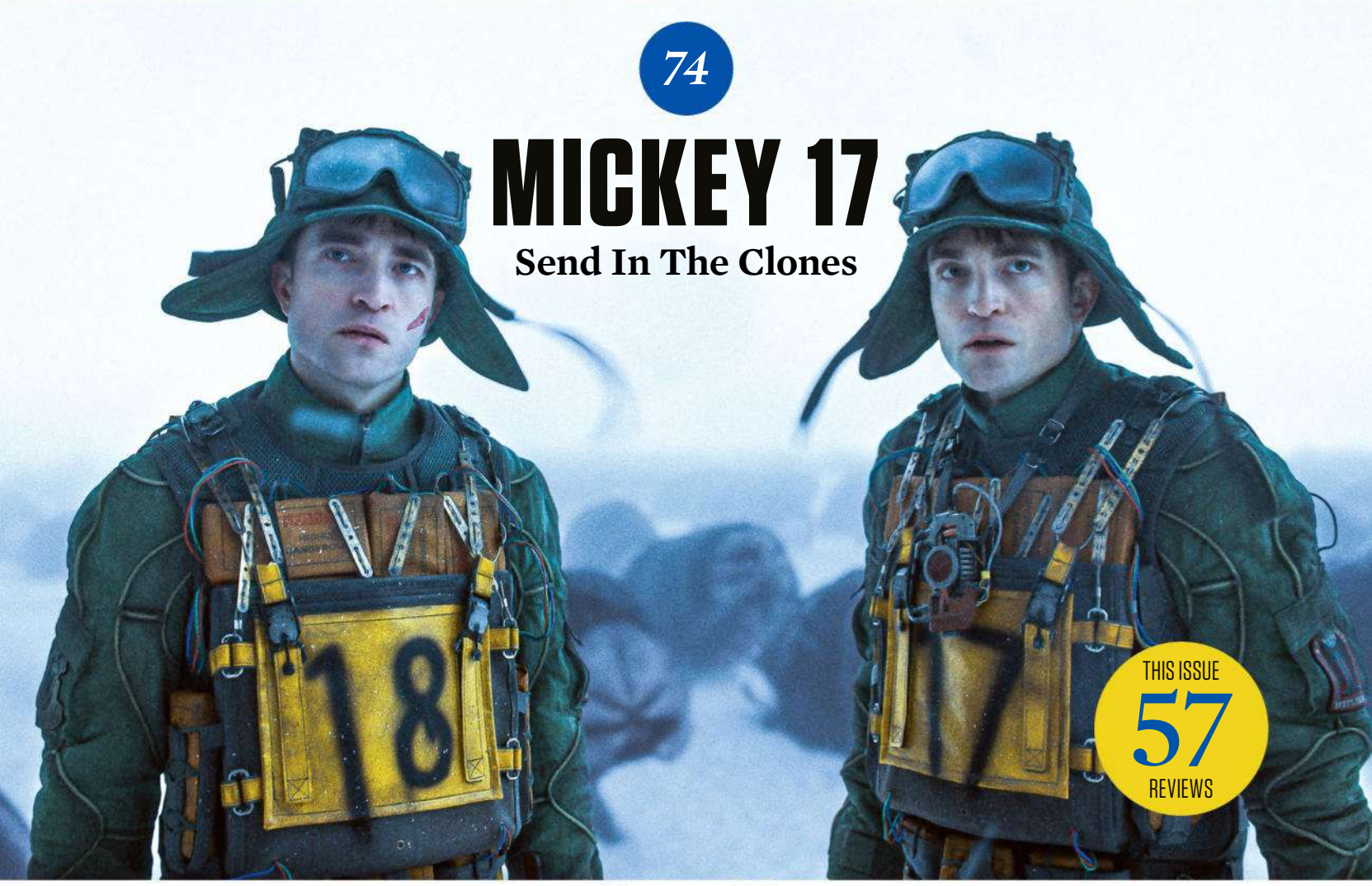
edited by Ian Berriman

CINEMA 74 | TV 77 | HOME ENTERTAINMENT 78 | BOOKS 86 | COMICS 92 | GAMES & STUFF 94

74

MICKEY 17

Send In The Clones



THIS ISSUE 57 REVIEWS

Highlights

77 DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

→ Justice is blind as Charlie Cox's Matt Murdock returns to the streets of Hell's Kitchen.

78 THE ELECTRIC STATE

→ The Russo Brothers adapt Simon Stålenhag's illustrated novel set in a post-apocalypse 1997.

86 DISSOLUTION

→ A woman dives into her husband's memories in Nicholas Binge's puzzle-box techno-thriller.

→ RATINGS EXPLAINED ★★★★★ SUPERB ★★★★☆ GOOD ★★★☆☆ AVERAGE ★★☆☆☆ POOR ★☆☆☆☆ TERRIBLE

"But I always sleep on the right." "That's *my* side."

MICKEY 17

The Clone Chores

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 137 minutes

Director **Bong Joon Ho**

Cast **Robert Pattinson, Mark Ruffalo, Toni Collette, Steven Yeun, Naomi Ackie**

A broad, blunt satire that's brimming with absurdity and rallies against social inequality, cruelty to animals and environmental destruction, *Mickey 17* sees Korean filmmaker Bong Joon Ho returning to his favoured themes.

It's Bong's first film since his Oscar-winning *Parasite* six years ago, and though it shares that movie's righteous anger while surveying haves and have-nots, it's far less precise and sophisticated. Wilfully so: here, Bong is choosing to operate closer to the register of his earlier English-language adventures, *Snowpiercer* and *Okja*.

Based on Edward Ashton's 2022 novel *Mickey7*, its action is set 30 years hence, as Mickey Barnes (Robert Pattinson) and his pal/business partner Timo (Steven Yeun) escape loan sharks on Earth by signing up for a voyage to colonise the distant ice-planet of Nilfheim.

Except that Mickey doesn't read the small print and literally signs his life away by agreeing to be an "expendable". The schlub is lumbered with every risky task and dies repeatedly, his body "reprinted" each time and implanted with his own downloaded memories.

> **"Never digs deep into its central concept"**

Unsurprisingly, Mickey, now on his 17th iteration, is a milquetoast with sloped shoulders and a vocal whine. Barely treated as human, he embraces each death with barely a whimper. Until, that is, he one day escapes a fall into a crevasse that looks like certain curtains, and returns to the base to find Mickey 18 (Pattinson again) already printed.

Mickey's girlfriend Nasha (Noami Ackie) likes the thought of two Mickeys in her bed. But "multiples" are not allowed, 18 wants him gone, and 17 realises that to die now would really be the end.

Too baggy at 137 minutes, and never digging deep into its central concept despite several characters asking our put-upon protagonist what it's like to die, *Mickey 17* also feels derivative in its world-building, from the base's grunge-industrial corridors to the white-washed ice planet. Painted in washed-out colours by DoP Darius Khondji, Bong's broad canvas is splashed with a couple of caricatures that might prove too colourful for some: politico-turned-religious cult leader Kenneth Marshall (Mark Ruffalo, channelling Donald Trump) and his wife Ylfa (Toni Collette) are in charge of the mission to colonise Nilfheim, and are as OTT as the corporate buffoons played by Tilda Swinton in *Snowpiercer* and Jake Gyllenhaal in *Okja*.

But that still leaves the wonder of the "Creepers", swarming, giant woodlouse-like creatures that inhabit Nilfheim, and the humanism that Bong locates, despite entertaining no illusions as to just how shitty people can be.

Also to be celebrated is the fact that Warner Bros was persuaded to stump up $80-150 million (depending who you believe) to stage such an idiosyncratic spectacle in these days of IP being the MVP. Maybe studio cinema can once more live, rather than just exist. **Jamie Graham**

i Long after the shoot, Robert Pattinson realised he partly based Mickey 17's weaselly voice on Steve Buscemi in *Fargo*.

HEART EYES

★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 97 minutes

Director **Josh Ruben**

Cast **Olivia Holt, Mason Gooding, Jordana Brewster, Gigi Zumbado**

The combination of romance and horror (and, indeed, comedy) is not exactly new, but in *Heart Eyes* it's given a snarky, mostly fresh spin.

Josh Ruben's film focuses on Ally McCabe (Olivia Holt), a jewellery advertising executive mourning a recent break-up. She has a meet-cute with Mason Gooding's smooth, romantic Jay Simmonds, only to discover he's been brought in to oversee her next campaign. To make matters worse, the "Heart Eyes Killer" is on the loose, having murdered lovers elsewhere in previous years.

The serial slayer targets Ally and Jay, mistaking them for a couple, and soon they're fighting for their lives while also discovering that they might have caught feelings for each other. It's formulaic, but thanks to a goofy script co-written by Phillip Murphy, Michael Kennedy and Christopher Landon (the latter pair worked on *Freaky* and *Happy Death Day*, which similarly blended genres), it works.

Yes, some of the twists are predictable, and there are a few awkward tonal shifts as the film tries to balance critique of romantic comedy tropes with utilising them, but it has an enjoyably gory and occasionally inventive approach to the kills. And it's hard to hate a film that casts *Fast & Furious* alumnus Jordana Brewster as one half of a detective duo named Hobbs and Shaw.

James White

OPUS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 103 minutes

Director **Mark Anthony Green**

Cast **Ayo Edebiri, John Malkovich, Murray Bartlett, Juliette Lewis**

Obsessive fandom, celebrity culture and the slavish sycophancy it generates are the broad targets of a muddled satire that takes its time building up to a gorily murderous finale.

Cut from the same cloth as *Blink Twice* and *The Menu*, Mark Anthony Green's feature debut boasts some queasily unsettling moments and a twisted set-piece involving bizarre puppet theatre. By the time *Opus* reaches its curiously muted conclusion, however, one wonders if its writer/director truly has a handle on what he's trying to say.

That's not a problem for its ambitious heroine Ariel (Ayo Edebiri), a young journalist fed up with being passed over at her *Rolling Stone*-esque magazine. That soon changes when she is invited, along with seasoned colleague Stan (Murray Bartlett) and some other media freeloaders, to an exclusive launch event for the long-awaited comeback disc from musical icon Moretti (John Malkovich), a reclusive genius who's spent 30 years sequestered at his gated compound in Utah.

It doesn't take long for Ariel to twig something's off and start suspecting that their host's army of acolytes have sinister plans for both her and her fellows. For all the lip-smacking glee Malkovich brings to his preposterous MC, though, *Opus* never lives up to the promise of its premise. **Neil Smith**

TIME TRAVEL IS DANGEROUS

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 28 MARCH

15 | 99 minutes

Director **Chris Reading**

Cast **Ruth Syratt, Megan Stevenson, Johnny Vegas, Sophie Thompson**

Two bungling junk shop owners replenish their stock with genuine historic artefacts after someone leaves a time-travelling bumper car next to their bins. But their clueless temporal plundering doesn't come without consequences.

Sadly, for a sci-fi comedy, it doesn't come with enough laughs, either. This often surreal, low-key British mockumentary (which brazenly abandons any pretence of being a mockumentary whenever the plot won't allow it) features a reliable cast of UK comedy stalwarts (Mark Heap, Jane Horrocks, Stephen Fry), some wonderfully bizarre moments, and plenty of *Carry On*-style fnarr-fnarr acronyms.

But it relies too heavily on deadpan delivery, sly glances and awkward, blank-faced dead air, which make what's actually a fast-moving plot feel oddly lethargic and stilted.

Johnny Vegas livens things up somewhat as an embittered TV pundit reduced to playing a robot sidekick on a popular science magazine show. And a sequence late on, set in an otherverse, makes a creditable attempt at bargain-bin Terry Gilliam weirdness.

But while some of the effects are fairly impressive, annoyingly it's the truly ropey CG dinosaurs that ultimately linger in the memory.

Dave Golder

Y2K

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

18 | 91 minutes

Director **Kyle Mooney**

Cast **Jaeden Martell, Rachel Zegler, Julian Dennison, Kyle Mooney**

Techno terror is not exactly the newest concept in the world, but with *Y2K*, *Saturday Night Live* veteran Kyle Mooney finds a way to make it funny and just a little emotional; think *Superbad* on a date with *The Terminator*.

Jaeden Martell (one of *It*'s Losers' Club) and *Deadpool 2*'s Julian Dennison are high-schoolers Eli and Danny, who just want to be in with the cool kids. Eli is also dealing with a crush on the nerdy Laura (Rachel Zegler, soon to be seen starring in *Snow White*).

The boys get their shot at a pre-millennium party in 1999, when the world is worried about computers failing. That's a valid concern here, as the millennium bug spurs a robot revolution, with machines of all types turning against their creators.

Chaos, of course, ensues, but mostly limited to a small town as the bodies start to pile up. The stakes rise mid-film, and there's enough of a feeling of threat even among all the goofiness to keep it from descending into total anarchy. Dennison and Martell make for an appealing duo, and while Zegler's role is thankless at times, she does at least get some solid scenes.

That said, it's a little messy on occasion, and the big finish is something of an anticlimax, but *Y2K* remains an entertaining blend of sci-fi, horror and comedy.

James White

THE END

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 28 MARCH

12A | 149 minutes

Director **Joshua Oppenheimer**

Cast **Tilda Swinton, George MacKay, Moses Ingram, Bronagh Gallagher**

When the musical heads to the arthouse, the results can be infuriating – yes, we're looking at you, Sparks, with your banal lyrics for *Annette* – and while *The End* has some admirable qualities, it's definitely a minority taste.

This post-apocalyptic tale centres on the family of a rich energy magnate and their servants, who've spent 20 years hunkered down in a luxurious bunker deep in a salt mine. When an outsider infiltrates this safe space, George MacKay's Son (who's never met a stranger) is captivated; Tilda Swinton's Mother suspicious.

Exposing this repressed middle-class existence as an elaborate exercise in denial, Girl (Moses Ingram) becomes a catalyst for reflection on past events, causing fractures which expand into schisms.

The underground location (a salt mine in Sicily) provides an eerily beautiful backdrop, and the performances are solid – Tim McInnerny (*Blackadder*'s Lord Percy Percy) rather steals the show as the family's affable butler, at one point even performing a soft shoe shuffle.

However, it's a relentlessly downbeat affair, with even the possibility of escape which Girl introduces ("What if we just left?") ultimately coming to nought. At getting on for two and a half hours, it's rather overlong. And if you don't come away from a musical humming the tunes, can you really count it as a success? **Ian Berriman**

IN THE LOST LANDS

Milla Jovowitch

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

15 | 101 minutes

Director **Paul WS Anderson**

Cast **Milla Jovovich, Dave Bautista, Arly Jover, Amara Okereke**

"This is no fairy tale," growls Dave Bautista's Boyce in the opening narration to this latest Paul WS Anderson smackdown-athon, but it'll certainly seem awfully familiar to anyone who has ever watched the director's output in the past.

There's his better half, Milla Jovovich, as a kickass warrior: here a warrior witch named Gray Alys, who grants wishes and is assigned by a queen to find a werewolf in a wasteland. Sure enough, she often uses two weapons at once.

There's a ruined world as a setting (we're back in post-apocalyptic territory), which Alys needs Boyce's help to traverse. And other characters who are more plot device than people. Anderson here swaps videogames as a source for a George RR Martin short story, originally published in a 1982 anthology. It's a cautionary tale based around the idea of being careful what you wish for, and has a vaguely interesting sting in its tail, but not much else that's fresh to offer.

> **"The story has a vaguely interesting sting in its tail"**

In Anderson's hands it's given the virtual production treatment, and though the backdrops are decent, they're still more mid-2000s action movie than *The Mandalorian*'s Volume. The cinematography, meanwhile, has levels of sepia tone to put Zack Snyder in a sugar coma and enough lens flare that even JJ Abrams would say, "Let's take it down a few notches, shall we?"

It's really just an excuse for Anderson to let Jovovich and Bautista loose on a variety of baddies, and in that regard it's serviceable enough if nothing more. **James White**

ℹ Gray Alys's tattoos are Icelandic runes. Make-up artist Lena Zieba cheekily spelled out the names of members of the crew.

GIANTS OF LA MANCHA

★★½☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

U | 78 minutes

Director **Gonzalo Gutierrez**

Cast **Micke Moreno, Cassie Glow, Matthew Moreno Lamprea, Thomas Harris**

This Spanish-made adventure introduces us to a descendant of windmill-whacker Don Quixote. Young Alfonso (Micke Moreno) has inherited his great-great-great-great grandfather's powers: he can see that windmills are actually giants and, randomly, his best friends are a bunch of imaginary rabbits.

These magical skills – which nobody else believes are real – are put to the test when his town falls victim to a series of storms, allowing property developer Corrasco (Thomas Harris, whose vocals are a cross between Stephen Fry and Eddie Izzard) to swoop in for his own nefarious purposes.

The animation feels cheap but it's definitely cheerful. All the characters have something useful to do – from Alfonso's parents, to the dog belonging to his sidekick Pancho (Matthew Moreno Lamprea). Fart gags and goofy sound effects lifted straight from *Scooby-Doo* will keep little ones entertained, while there's more than a hint of *Howl's Moving Castle* about the bad guys' monsters.

All of this, however, is undermined by the English dub. Alfonso's wavering voice soon grates, and too many characters are either whiny or anoyingly high-pitched. Kids will enjoy this, but adults may want to bring some noise-cancelling headphones. **Jayne Nelson**

DAREDEVIL: BORN AGAIN

He's back, and so's that Netflix vibe

★★★★☆

- UK/US **Disney+, Tuesdays, streaming now**
- Showrunner **Dario Scardapane**
- Cast **Charlie Cox, Vincent D'Onofrio, Margarita Levieva, Ayelet Zurer**

EPISODES 1.01-1.09 **Finally, *Daredevil*** is reborn on Disney+, but it wasn't a pregnancy without complications. Much has been written about the show's production problems, with the project halted after six episodes had been filmed, and a new showrunner parachuted in to forge a new direction.

Which, it turned out, was an old direction: why not just make it like Netflix used to? And make it a continuation? But since new showrunner Dario (*The Punisher*) Scardapane didn't start from scratch, but instead had to incorporate material already shot into his new framework, wouldn't this troubled rebirth result in visible stress fractures?

Well, frankly, yes... if you know what you're looking for and you squint really hard: there's a bank heist episode that feels oddly standalone, and various examples of ruthless cross-cutting between scenes where overlapping dialogue does a lot of heavy lifting trying to tie them together.

But, honestly, why bother? If you simply put all that to the back of your mind and enjoy the season for what's actually there on the screen, *Born Again* offers some top-quality, hard-boiled small-screen superheroics.

The overarching plot has Wilson Fisk/Kingpin apparently turning his back on crime to run for Mayor of New York City, though wife Vanessa finds it difficult to let go of the family business. Meanwhile Matt Murdock turns his back on his Daredevil persona after Bullseye kills a close friend. Which could be good timing, since Fisk has a bee in his bonnet about vigilantes, and starts recreating the police force as his own lawless security firm.

Born Again is not quite as dark as those old Netflix shows used to be. On the other hand, neither is it as slow and bloated (being just nine episodes long helps). It feels nearer to *The Penguin*'s "*The Sopranos* meets the edges of the superhero world" vibe, and though on many levels it's not quite as polished, it does have much better fight scenes (including one very lengthy, and very impressive, one-shot beat-'em-up – one of TV *Daredevil*'s signature tropes).

The lead performances are exquisite, especially from D'Onofrio, who can make a single finger drumming feel like a volcano of pent-up rage. Fisk here becomes a thought-provoking Trump allegory that refreshingly doesn't revert to goofy Trumpisms; this is more about the abuse of power and popularity. Frank Castle also makes a welcome guest appearance, and Jon Bernthal is as brilliant in the role as ever.

The series is not without issues. The arc plot struggles to evolve coherently at times; a couple of the new supporting characters are woefully underdeveloped; the Fisks' time in couples' therapy is an unconvincing contrivance; and Matt seems to have forgotten that he could use super-scent to track people who run off. But if a troubled production can come out this good, imagine what season two might be like. **Dave Golder**

Daredevil's man-cave is a bit of a work in progress.

i *Scooby-Doo*'s Matthew Lillard has been confirmed for season two, but there's no news on his character. Stilt-Man, maybe?

SMALL TOWN, BIG STORY

★★★★½

- UK **streaming now on NOW/Sky Atlantic, Thursdays**
- Creator **Chris O'Dowd**
- Cast **Christina Hendricks, Paddy Considine, David Rawle, Eileen Walsh**

EPISODES 1.01-1.06 **Running the** full gamut of "quirky" from "rural folk and their charming esoteric ways", through "This is all getting a bit *Twin Peaks*" to "WHAT THE F**K JUST HAPPENED?", this slice of Oirish whimsy from *The IT Crowd* star Chris O'Dowd starts and ends like two entirely different shows. Both of them a lot of fun, thankfully.

The first episode has a *Detectorists* tone, with the residents of an Irish village trying to convince a US TV company that its new *Game Of Thrones*-style TV show should be filmed there. SF elements only start being hinted at in episode two. After that, the show accelerates both the sci-fi and the broader comedy aspects until the finale feels more like *Attack The Block*.

It's a little meandering at first, but some great performances, sly wit and an unexpected cameo from a pig's head keep things watchable. By episode three the show's found its groove, balancing the human drama with the ever more outlandish elements.

The only real issue is that bane of modern TV: it feels like it should be a miniseries, but ends on a cliffhanger, with many loose ends left hanging. You can't help thinking that a second season won't have the benefit of all those surprising tonal changes. **Dave Golder**

THE ELECTRIC STATE

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 12 | SVOD

Directors **Anthony Russo, Joe Russo**

Cast **Millie Bobby Brown, Chris Pratt, Ke Huy Quan, Stanley Tucci**

NETFLIX **A starkly haunting story** of post-war desolation receives a mitigating dollop of Spielbergian whimsy in this adaptation of Simon Stålenhag's 2018 graphic novel, which is retooled here largely as a *Transformers*-esque vehicle for *Stranger Things*' Millie Bobby Brown.

Set in an alternate version of '90s America in the aftermath of a quelled robot uprising, the Russo Brothers' fantasy imagines a world in which mankind's automated helpers – loveable animatronics with endearingly cartoonish features – have been banished to a vast exclusion zone in the dusty south west.

Brown's orphaned Michelle must venture into the "Ex" when one such droid – the perma-grinning Cosmo (Alan Tudyk) – seeks her out in a way that suggests he's an electronic manifestation of the beloved little brother (Woody Norman) she lost before the war.

In Stålenhag's original, Michelle's quest to discover what remains of her sibling becomes a desperately sad odyssey through a land littered with the crumbling ruins of giant battle drones.

The film, in contrast, takes a more upbeat tack, partnering Brown's plucky teen not just with a metal buddy who, à la Bumblebee, can only talk in fractured soundbites, but also a wily scavenger (Chris Pratt's Keats) with his own robotic companion in the form of the shape-shifting Herman (Anthony Mackie).

The Russos doubtless had their lead's Gen Z fanbase in mind when they took their source material down this path. The result, though, tends towards the cutesy, not least when Michelle and Keats stumble upon an abandoned mall full of amiable automatons with names like Penny Pal (Jenny Slate), Popfly (Brian Cox) and Perplexo (Hank Azaria).

Ke Huy Quan ups the Amblin factor further in his dual role as a doctor and a talking personal computer. Woody Harrelson, meanwhile, voices a top-hatted peanut robot modelled on the US Planters mascot of old.

A sliver of steel is provided by *Breaking Bad*'s Giancarlo Esposito as a ruthless enforcer who operates a gun-toting droid remotely and is nicknamed the Butcher of Schenectady. The majority of the villainy, however, is supplied by Stanley Tucci's Ethan Skate, a Musk-like tech mogul who has contrived to hook humanity to an addictive VR simulacrum. "Our world is a tyre fire floating on an ocean of piss!" he declares at one point from a Seattle HQ that becomes the location for the film's climactic face-off. For the most part, though, he's a peculiarly peripheral figure, a failing rather highlighted by the fact that he and Brown never share a scene.

> **"The Russos doubtless had their lead's Gen Z fanbase in mind"**

With its battered retro-futurism reminiscent of *Loki*, *The Electric State* is always impressive visually. Yet its mix of lofty adult themes and kid-friendly hijinks rarely gels well enough to stop it seeming, like its robot characters, rather cobbled together. **Neil Smith**

Hair by: bush, backwards. Clothes: models' own.

ℹ Ke Huy Quan took over a role originally set to be played by his *Everything Everywhere All At Once* co-star Michelle Yeoh.

HARLEQUIN

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1980 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Simon Wincer**

Cast **Robert Powell, David Hemmings, Carmen Duncan, Gus Mercurio**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Written by** Everett De Roche, who brought us *Long Weekend*, *Roadgames* and *Patrick*, this curate's egg Aussie thriller puts a fantastical spin on the Rasputin story.

Robert Powell plays Gregory Wolfe, a mysterious faith healer who inveigles his way into the home of David Hemmings's politician Nick Rast (read that surname backwards) by curing his terminally ill son.

Wolfe's motivation is muddy, and it seems rather a lot of fuss over a small fry politician (Rast may be a US Senator – the non-specific setting means it's unclear). There are bathetic moments too: in one, Wolfe leaves a Turin shroud-like self-portrait on the kitchen floor. Some Flash will fix that.

Powell's performance as a possible conman/possible fallen angel is the main draw. In a role encompassing magic, mime and maniacal laughter (plus outfits *Blake's 7*'s Avon would blanch at) he's by turns charming, seductive and creepy.

Extras A new critical talking head (16 minutes) is a solid overview. Kim Newman also supplies a somewhat rambling discussion of Ozploitation (16 minutes). Of nine archival interviews, four hail from 2008 doc *Not Quite Hollywood* (50 minutes); Indicator have also unearthed 162 minutes of audio taped by a trade magazine in 1979. Plus: a 2004 director/producer commentary; isolated score; gallery; scripts; trailers; 80-page booklet. **Ian Berriman**

DOCTOR WHO: THE SAVAGES

Transfer saga

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1966 | PG | Blu-ray/DVD

Directors **Christopher Barry, AnneMarie Walsh**

Cast **William Hartnell, Peter Purves, Jackie Lane, Frederick Jaeger**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **It's unlikely that** "The Savages" is anyone's favourite *Doctor Who* story – and not just because it's been wiped from the archive for decades.

Featuring no monsters or robots, and no especially memorable scenes, it's best known for the abrupt departure of Peter Purves's companion Steven. Arriving on an unnamed planet, the Doctor and co discover an advanced culture whose idyllic existence is the result of "One simple discovery" (echoes of the future internet...). The Elders use a device to extract the life force of the spear-chucking "savages". "All progress is made by exploitation," argues their leader, Jano. The Doctor, naturally, disagrees.

A worthy if transparent exploration of colonialism, it's a simplistic affair, chocka with naive dialogue. The main point of interest comes when the Doctor is subjected to the machine, thereby infecting Jano with his conscience: cue a mildly amusing William Hartnell impersonation.

The Doctor thinks about a ham sandwich he once had.

The animation is inoffensive, swerving one point of controversy – the Elder actors wore silver make-up, which looks awkwardly like blackface in some stills. Only once does the drive to boost the scale cause a clash: a character remarks how narrow a passage is, but it looks practically cavernous. By the recent standards of this range, that's good going.

Extras Choose colour or B&W animation, or reconstructions which make use of off-screen "telesnaps". These come with commentaries featuring either guest stars Kay Patrick and Robert Sidaway or Peter Purves and lowly floor assistant Julian Aston. No one, sadly, remembers very much...

There are two feature-length documentaries. A shamelessly nerdy, discursive search for topics worth discussing – will "First use of a quarry as an alien planet" do? – *Remembering/Forgetting The Savages* (99 minutes) nevertheless proves more engaging than the story itself. A delve into the significance of working title "The White Savages" proves particularly interesting.

> "A worthy if transparent exploration of colonialism"

A second documentary (90 minutes) profiles Innes Lloyd, *Doctor Who*'s producer for a couple of years, whose post-*Who* work was rather more celebrated.

Drawing on old fanzine interviews and personal notes found after his death to tell Lloyd's life story in his own words, it also interviews his widow and, rather impressively, ropes in two famous collaborators: Alan Bennett (who considers Lloyd "a muse") and Michael Palin.

A 1968 BBC training film on advance planning (27 minutes) follows director Christopher Barry as he works on *Z-Cars*. Plus: surviving footage; stills gallery; animation gallery.

Ian Berriman

i Tony Holland, future co-creator of *EastEnders*, has a small role as one of the Elders' unnamed technicians.

DOUGLAS ADAMS: THE MAN WHO IMAGINED OUR FUTURE

★★★½☆

RELEASED 27 MARCH

2025 | TBC | SVOD

Director **Todd Austin**

SKY ARTS **Twenty-four years** on, the passing of the creator of *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* at just 49 still stings, in part because this early adopter never got to enjoy (if that's the right word) a world of iPhones, social media and burgeoning AI. This documentary (circa 66 minutes) sets out to tackle some of the questions of life, the universe and everything raised by his work.

Featuring interviews with collaborators like *Hitchhiker's* producer John Lloyd, old pals like Stephen Fry, and (more unexpectedly) his siblings, it's attractively presented, using some charmingly lo-fi animation. Inspired, no doubt, by Kevin Jon Davies's excellent recent book *42*, it also draws on artefacts from the Adams archive at St John's College, Cambridge – photos, notebooks, typewritten howls of despair at writers' block.

If we have a criticism, it's that the doc's thesis isn't always clear. Is this a biography? An exploration of Adams's "visionary" view of future tech? A celebration of his passion for conservation? On occasion, there's a feeling of the gears grinding as the focus switches subject. But then, that comes with the territory when you're discussing the life of a polymath whose genius extended in many directions. **Ian Berriman**

O'DESSA

Stranger Sings

★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | TBC | SVOD

Director **Geremy Jasper**

Cast **Sadie Sink, Murray Bartlett, Kelvin Harrison Jr, Regina Hall**

DISNEY+ ***Stranger Things* star** Sadie Sink wields a magical gee-tar and sings for her life in this neon-tinged dystopian rock opera. She's dirt-poor farmer O'Dessa Galloway, told by her daddy that, as a seventh son – despite having no "pecker" – her music will one day save the world.

After her mother's death, O'Dessa heads to the city, finding that its residents have been brainwashed by TV star Plutonovich (played brilliantly by former *The White Lotus* concierge Murray Bartlett as a loony combination of Bruce Forsyth and Russell Brand). O'Dessa soon falls in love with sex worker Euri (Kelvin Harrison Jr), and the two teenagers unleash their inner Romeo and Juliets.

It's hard to describe this film's chaotic vibes: *Mad Max* crossed with *The Wiz*, perhaps? *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* but made by Baz Luhrmann? A post-apocalyptic *RuPaul's Drag Race*? However you try to pigeonhole it, writer/director Geremy Jasper has such a confident hold on his vision that the end result can only be praised – particularly the songs, which he also wrote.

The only disappointing note stems from Euri; Kelvin Harrison is talented, but next to the primal energy of Sadie Sink's lung-busting performance, the poor lad never stood a chance. **Jayne Nelson**

i O'Dessa's dad is played by singer Pokey LaFarge, who once hitch-hiked/rambled across the USA just like his character.

"Say that about my banjo *one more time.*"

LIKE TEARS IN RAIN

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | PG | SVOD/download

VIAPLAY **Don't expect deep** dives on *Blade Runner* or *The Hitcher* from this portrait of Rutger Hauer – the former only comes into focus at the end; the latter's barely mentioned.

No matter: the personal story of '80s cinema's favourite villain is more interesting. The work of Hauer's goddaughter, it boasts affecting contributions from his widow and friends like Whoopi Goldberg, plus a plethora of personal footage (Hauer was constantly filming), painting a picture of a liberated, joyful life. You'll come away resolved to carpe diem. **Ian Berriman**

DIE ALONE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2024 | 15 | Download

Set after a pandemic dubbed "Mother Nature's revenge", this downbeat post-apocalyptic puzzler follows a young fella searching for his girlfriend after waking up with amnesia. Carrie-Ann Moss's take-no-shit middle-aged woman takes him in.

Die Alone doesn't reinvent the wheel, but its vegetational take on the Infected supplies the odd surreal visual (a zombie with a bush sprouting from its bonce). And while some twists hove into view well in advance, the most effective manages to hide in plain sight. **Ian Berriman**

BOOGER

★★½☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED 7 APRIL

2024 | 15 | Blu-ray

A grief funk is rendered monstrous in Mary Dauterman's indie debut. After the death of Anna's roommate, the cat they adopted (Booger) escapes. Unravelling, she grows increasingly feline: staring at birds, retching up great balls of hair, biting the head off a rat.

There's the odd striking shot (like a dreamscape image of Anna curled up amidst black fur), and Zoe Polanski's score is effectively oppressive. But as Anna proceeds to acceptance, it all feels a tad pointless.

Extras Video essays; galleries; booklet. **Calvin Baxter**

GATOR CREEK

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2025 | 15 | Download

A rickety charter plane crashes in the swamps, downgrading its passengers to gator-bait class. The gators themselves have enjoyed an upgrade, transformed by a toxic spill from a secret drugs lab into even deadlier predators.

This critter flick falls back on standard tropes – the selfish a-hole hoarding a working cellphone inevitably gets his just and gory deserts – but for all its overfamiliarity it's an efficient, slickly executed survival thriller, dripping with bayou atmosphere. **Nick Setchfield**

DOCTOR WHO Season Seven

Battlefield Earth

★★★★½ EXTRAS ★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1970 | PG | Blu-ray

Producers **Derrick Sherwin, Barry Letts**

Cast **Jon Pertwee, Caroline John, Nicholas Courtney, John Levene**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Banished to Earth,** forcibly transmogrified into the commanding form of Jon Pertwee, the Doctor not only confronts a new format, a new face and a new decade but a whole new era of television in this, the first season of *Doctor Who* in living colour.

Opener "Spearhead From Space" is a template alien invasion tale, bristling with bodysnatching paranoia. All shot on film, it approaches the gloss of an ITC adventure series. "Doctor Who And The Silurians" offers a threat from within, built on the brilliant premise of an ancient reptile race out to reclaim *their* planet, while "The Ambassadors Of Death" channels *Quatermass*-style intrigue, its eerily faceless astronauts one of the more underrated *Who* menaces. Lava-drenched finale "Inferno" hurls us to a parallel Earth, complete with fascistic doppelgängers. It's a colder, grittier, altogether less cosy prototype version of the velvety Pertwee years, but this is ground zero for a golden age.

Extras Jon Culshaw fronts a profile of Pertwee-era mainstay Nicholas Courtney, alias the beloved Brigadier; it's as much an investigation as a celebration of the man behind the immortal moustache, taking a deep dive into family history (86 minutes).

Another, equally revelatory documentary examines the life and legacy of writer Malcolm Hulke, surely the only creative in *Who* history to earn his own MI5 file (47 minutes). UNIT regular John Levene emerges as a curious mix of self-belief, showbiz dazzle and raw-nerved vulnerability in an interview with Matthew Sweet (64 minutes); elsewhere Sweet probes the show's shifting relationship with suburbia, revisiting the Ealing locations of the original Auton invasion (35 minutes).

Radio 4's Robin Ince places *Doctor Who* in the context of the real world Space Age, complete with James Burke-tastic treasures from the BBC archive (50 minutes) while another overlong Escape Room feature is lifted by the energy of its participants - the irrepressible Katy Manning among them – not to mention some smuggled innuendo (70 minutes).

Convention footage from 1994 offers a welcome chance to see companion Caroline John paired with producer Barry Letts (49 minutes), and we also glimpse her recording a DVD commentary with Courtney in 2000 (six minutes). Each story gets the breezy *Behind The Sofa* treatment with assorted *Who* luminaries, while there are punchy new edits of "Doctor Who And The Silurians" (107 minutes) and "Inferno" (96 minutes), along with an extended edit of "Inferno" episode five that restores a scene.

All this plus an extract of an audio interview with "Spearhead From Space" director Derek Martinus (five minutes), photo galleries, vintage trails and continuities, the ever-informative production subtitles, and a wealth of PDF goodies including *Radio Times* cuttings and original scripts, on top of extras from the DVD range. Plenty there to brighten your exile on Earth... **Nick Setchfield**

"... and so *she* says, not with that in your hand I won't!"

> **"The first season of Doctor Who in living colour"**

Oliver! star Ron Moody was offered the role of the Doctor before Jon Pertwee but turned it down, to his later regret.

ASSAULT! JACK THE RIPPER

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1976 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Yasuharu Hasebe**

Cast **Tamaki Katsura, Yutaka Hayashi, Yuri Yamashina**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Part of the** Nikkatsu studio's Roman Porno series, *Assault!* is a challenge to score. Judged purely on its capacity to leave your jaw hanging, it's a five, but that'd leave you looking like a sicko.

Teaming director Yasuharu Hasebe (who brought us Bond spoof *Black Tight Killers*) and writer Chiho Katsura (of the demented haunted house flick *Hausu*), this isn't a trip to Whitechapel. Echoing movies like *The Honeymoon Killers*, it follows two cafe workers who, after accidentally offing an escaped mental patient, find that only killing puts them in the mood for top-notch nookie.

Packing seven sex scenes and 11 murders into 72 minutes, it's so excessively nihilistic that it ultimately achieves a kind of preposterous absurdity – something further enhanced by the wildly inappropriate soundtrack, all Burt Bacharach-esque lounge and funky breakbeats. Still, one hesitates before recommending a film in which multiple women are stabbed in the vagina... Approach with caution.

Extras Watching *Assault!* in company seems mortifyingly awkward, so hats off to 88 Films' commentators Jasper Sharp and Amber T for reciting bios over frantic humping. Half of an expert intro (12 minutes) is spent reciting the plot – when will people learn? Plus: trailer; gallery; booklet. **Ian Berriman**

DEEP BLUE SEA

Artificial fintelligence

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1999 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Renny Harlin**

Cast **Saffron Burrows, Thomas Jane, Samuel L Jackson, LL Cool J**

***Jaws* may have spawned a** feeding frenzy of copycat movies but the species had drifted into near-extinction after 1987's sequel-too-far *Jaws: The Revenge*.

Deep Blue Sea returned nature's apex predator to blockbuster status. A sleek, explosive serving of '90s hokum from *Die Hard 2*'s Renny Harlin, it supercharges the sharksploitation formula. These "gliding monsters" are not only more convincing – a mix of early CG and still-impressive animatronics – but they're smarter, too, their brains upgraded by genetic engineering. If *Jaws* is the source DNA then there are also unmistakable echoes of *Jurassic Park* (damn you, science!) along with a heavy dose of *The Poseidon Adventure* as Harlin piles on the mayhem and spectacle, the fireballs, floods and fights for survival. Turning Samuel L Jackson into a shark snack, meanwhile, remains one of cinema's greatest gotchas.

Extras This Arrow Video release offers a choice of two new commentaries by critic Rebekah McKendry and screenwriter Duncan Kennedy, along with the original 1999 track by Harlin and Jackson from the DVD. An engaging interview with production designer William Sandell touches on *RoboCop* and *Total Recall* too (25 minutes), while critic Trace Thurman offers nothing less than a full-blown Freudian psychoanalysis (19 minutes). It's an intriguing take on such bubblegum fare, but a little heavy-going.

> **"A sleek, explosive serving of '90s hokum"**

Two vintage promo featurettes deliver a general peek behind-the-scenes (15 minutes) and a more specific look at the fabulous animatronic sharks (eight minutes), while five inessential deleted scenes come with optional commentary by the director (eight minutes).

Plus: trailer; galleries; 60-page booklet; poster; three postcards. **Nick Setchfield**

"I have fins, therefore I am. How's that for smart?"

i Look for the Louisiana number plate removed from a shark in an early scene – it's identical to the one in *Jaws*.

THIRST

Blood pressure

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★½

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1979 | 15 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Rod Hardy**

Cast **Chantal Contouri, Shirley Cameron, Max Phipps, Henry Silva**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Australia's first** proper vampire film puts an ingenious spin on the lore – one that'll leave viewers with a phobia regarding blood feeling slightly faint, and possibly a few others pondering going vegan.

Chantal Contour's Kate is abducted by an organisation called The Brotherhood. They tell her she's a descendent of the infamous Elizabeth Báthory, then begin conditioning her into leaving behind disgust and embracing her destiny. This "master race" has industrialised feeding, blending concentration camp, cult compound and factory farm in a "dairy" that processes human "blood cows".

It's a well-realised, tension-generating concept that has you rooting for Kate, but all too aware she's probably doomed. Shirley Cameron impresses as the vamp most determined to break her, channeling Nurse Ratched's weaponised reasonableness. And there are some neat touches: instead of suddenly sprouting extended canines, these vamps pop in metallic fangs.

The only significant flaw is a curiously abrupt ending – according to director Rod Hardy, after some of the funding fell through, producer Anthony Ginnane simply tore the last 15 pages out of the script...

Extras A decent intro by Aussie cinema expert Stephen Morgan (18 minutes) is Indicator's one new commission. A 2004 Ginnane interview covers the film's origins and key scenes (14 minutes). A 2019 podcast guesting Hardy lasts two and a half hours – you need to be Aussie yourself to get full value.

David Hemmings is in raconteur mode during a 1979 chat show appearance (16 minutes), wrapping up with a magic trick! Ginnane, Hardy, actor Rod Mullinar and the DoP feature in interviews shot for 2008 Ozploitation doc *Not Quite Hollywood* (40 minutes); recurring themes are Contouri's dedication in a bruising role, and Hemmings's boozing. Plus: a 1979 radio interview with Contouri (24 minutes); commentary by Hardy and Ginnane; discussion of a stunt; isolated score; trailer; TV spots; gallery; 80-page book. **Ian Berriman**

Don't worry! The Daz Whites got it out of the towels. Phew.

i When Henry Silva's vamp falls from a helicopter, he hung from a cherry picker – raised far higher than he was happy with!

NEW RELIGION

Gentleman Takes Polaroids

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

2022 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Keishi Kondo**

Cast **Kaho Seto, Satoshi Oka, Ryuseigun Saionji**

Kids, do not copy this lady and smoke in the darkroom.

BLU-RAY DEBUT **If you're the sort of** freak who appreciates the more cryptic side of David Lynch's oeuvre, you may be hypnotised by this enigmatic Japanese indie.

It's centred on call girl Miyabi (Kaho Seto), whose daughter died three years ago. Her latest client has unusual requirements: on each visit, he simply takes Polaroids of different body parts. The girl who previously serviced his needs went insane, then carried out a stabbing spree. Something supernatural's going on, but what exactly?

Discerning that is a challenge, as this is a film where nothing's spelled out, and it can be hard to distinguish between hallucination, dream and memory. Indeed, once you delve into the bonuses and hear terms like "Moth demon" and "doppelgangers" bandied about, it may come as a surprise.

Director Keishi Kondo – who's from an avant-garde music background – believes sound and visuals are equally important, and that comes across alright. The score, mostly the work of Zeze Wakamatsu, mixes ominous industrial rumbling with the odd shimmering synth cloud.

Combined with a giallo-esque approach to colour (scenes bathed in red or blue), dreamy slow-mo and an air of detachment, this results in a film as atmospheric as it is mystifying. "I wanted to leave some kind of scar on the viewer's heart", the director says. Job done.

Extras Connected by two characters, 29-minute short "Neu Mirrors" further plays with the concept that photography can affect reality, as a female assassin's identity disintegrates due to a multiple-exposure portrait.

The director expounds his philosophy in a half-hour interview, which also touches on his love of *The Evil Dead* and Andrei Tarkovsky. In his commentary, he further dispels some of the fog of mystery, and goes into granular detail in "That cup was from IKEA" fashion. A behind-the-scenes piece (29 minutes) compiles brief snippets of everything from location scouting to ADR. Eleven minutes of "out-takes" are actually deleted scenes. Plus: crowdfunding teasers; trailers. **Ian Berriman**

i Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse* pops up; Kondo describes the film as "a homage to the feeling you get when reading it".

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DARK NIGHT OF THE SCARECROW

Straw Power

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1981 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Frank De Felitta**

Cast **Charles Durning, Tonya Crowe, Larry Drake, Jocelyn Brando**

UNITED ARCHIVES GMBH / ALAMY

BLU-RAY DEBUT **Gorehounds be** warned: this cult TV movie is an unlikely fit for 88 Films' Slasher Classics Collection. But while it's short on splatter, carnage and exposed entrails, it delivers on atmosphere and body count.

When a smalltown vigilante mob mistakenly murders an innocent simpleton, retribution is unleashed, seemingly incarnated in the sinister figure of a scarecrow. This straw-stuffed spirit of vengeance trades in the deadly possibilities of threshing machines and combine harvesters rather than knives or chainsaws, and director Frank De Felitta stages the kills with impeccable restraint.

It's low-voltage horror, to be sure, with the unflashy look of fast-turnaround '70s TV, but it captures an authentic sense of heartland gothic, launching the killer scarecrow genre even as it manages to be something altogether subtler and more interesting. And the ragged, sack-faced spectre itself makes for an unforgettable image, never more ominous than when standing in broad daylight.

Extras You have a choice of three audio commentaries: two with assorted horror experts and one with De Felitta and screenwriter JD Feigelson. Robert F Lyons reminisces about playing doomed townsman Skeeter Norris – "I dropped IQ 30 or 40 points!" – (21 minutes), while an informative 2011 retrospective celebrates the film's 30th anniversary, revealing an intriguing connection to Ray Bradbury (32 minutes).

There's also archive footage of Feigelson reuniting with stars Larry Drake and Tonya Crowe for a 2011 Fright Night Film Fest panel. Plus: original CBS promos; an extensive photo gallery, including many behind-the-scenes images; booklet.

Nick Setchfield

i Frank De Felitta was also a novelist, best known for 1975 reincarnation tale *Audrey Rose*, later filmed by Robert Wise.

GODZILLA VS BIOLLANTE

Rumbling Rose

★★★½☆ EXTRAS ★★★½☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1989 | 12 | 4K/Blu-ray

Director **Kazuki Ɖmori**

Cast **Kunihiko Mitamura, Yoshiko Tanaka, Masanobu Takashima**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **While the title** suggests an extended kaiju rumble, this seventh entry in the saga (a follow-up to 1984 reboot *The Return Of Godzilla*) delivers something rather more involved.

Biollante is probably the least of Big G's problems. An attempt to find a modern-day equivalent for the threat of nuclear power, this product of bio-engineering was born by mixing cells from Godzilla, plants, and a dead human girl. The resulting creation, a vine-flapping behemoth topped by a toothy rose, is slightly risible and – in its initial form – not much of a threat to our scaly champ.

There are a hell of a lot of moving parts here, with the story zipping along at pace through a succession of high-tech facilities, apeing Hollywood along the way with machine-gun shootouts and truck flips. Plot elements include an "Anti-Nuclear Energy Bacteria" which could kill Godzilla, a young psychic who can use her powers to attack him, *Thunderbirds*-esque craft the Super X2, maser-packing tanks, American mercenaries, and a Middle Eastern assassin.

It's nonsense, but enjoyably goofy nonsense, with a stirring score and some endearingly dated vector graphics. And its heart is in the right place. Just don't expect anything resembling subtext, as characters make statements as bald as "The real monsters are the humans who created them!"

Extras The highlight of this Criterion Collection release is a 1993 Making Of (49 minutes) crammed with behind-the-scenes glimpses: cue delightful footage of the cameraman zooming across a Toho Studios pool on a raft, as fireworks bounce off the poor sap in the Godzilla suit.

A three-minute video shows off sculpts of alternate designs for Biollante. A silent reel of effects footage (seven minutes) reveals sequences not used in the final film. Plus: a well-prepped critical commentary; TV spots; trailers.

Ian Berriman

i The first draft script (written by a dentist) won a 1985 story contest. Only a few elements from that made it to the screen.

NOW ON DIGITAL FORMATS *Companion* • *Dog Man* • *Presence* • *The Rule Of Jenny Pen* (28 March) • *Sonic The Hedgehog 3* • *Wolf Man*

964 PINOCCHIO

★★★☆☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED 31 MARCH

1991 | 18 | Blu-ray

Director **Shozin Fukui**

Cast **Haji Suzuki, Onn-chan, Kôji Ôtsubo, Rakumaro San'yûtei**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **"When the spirit** has overcome the limitations of the flesh, superior abilities will develop", says director Shozin Fukui about his arthouse cyberpunk splatter flick in one of the interviews on this disc. It's about as close an explanation as you're likely to get for this defiantly singular film, so just sit back and enjoy/endure a perplexing ride.

In a cyberpunk future (that looks like '90s Tokyo), an amnesiac sex slave cyborg (Haji Suzuki) is rescued by young Himiko (Onn-chan), who helps him regain his memories. It's not long, however, before the cyborg's owners come looking for him. Cue blood, nudity, extensive vomiting, and more screaming than dialogue.

Shot guerilla-style and on the cheap – several sequences appear to have been shot with a cracked lens, and almost every crowd scene involves confused passersby staring into the camera – *964 Pinocchio* is a true assault on the senses. If you can handle the whiplash-inducing camerawork and abundance of grue, you'll find a truly original film, if not a likeable one.

Extras Film writer Stephen Thrower provides a 16-minute intro. There are two interviews with director Shozin Fukui: one archival (33 minutes) and one new (21 minutes), plus two shorts: "Gerorisuto" (11 minutes) and "Caterpillar' (32 minutes) – a cyborg tale that's a clear predecessor of *964*. Plus: trailer; booklet. **Will Salmon**

"Avez-vous un dépliant sur La Rochelle?" "Oui."

JE T'AIME JE T'AIME

Past life regression

★★★★☆ EXTRAS ★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

1968 | 15 | Blu-ray

Director **Alain Resnais**

Cast **Claude Rich, Olga Georges-Picot, Anouk Ferjac**

BLU-RAY DEBUT **An influence on** Michel Gondry's *Eternal Sunshine Of The Spotless Mind*, this is a highly unusual time travel movie – one which, in Gondry's words, "uses editing as a special effect".

Claude Rich plays a writer recovering from a suicide attempt, enlisted in an experiment to send him back in time – not physically, but psychologically – then return him after a minute. It goes wrong, and he uncontrollably flits back and forth, experiencing moments from his past – from workaday drudgery to a tragic death.

The writing process was highly unorthodox, with novelist Jacques Sternberg penning scores of fragments for Resnais to place in order. The result is a film which – once we're within that framing device – makes *Pulp Fiction* look like child's play.

Though there's more structure here than simple randomness, the film's pleasures are less those of a conventional narrative, and more akin to piecing together a puzzle. Echoes of *Eternal Sunshine* sound clearest on occasions when memories surreally bleed together: a bathing woman in an office; a phone booth filled with water.

It takes a special leading man to hold your attention in such circumstances, and Rich is up to the task, while Polish composer Krzysztof Penderecki's mournful score renders even a simple car journey palpably eerie.

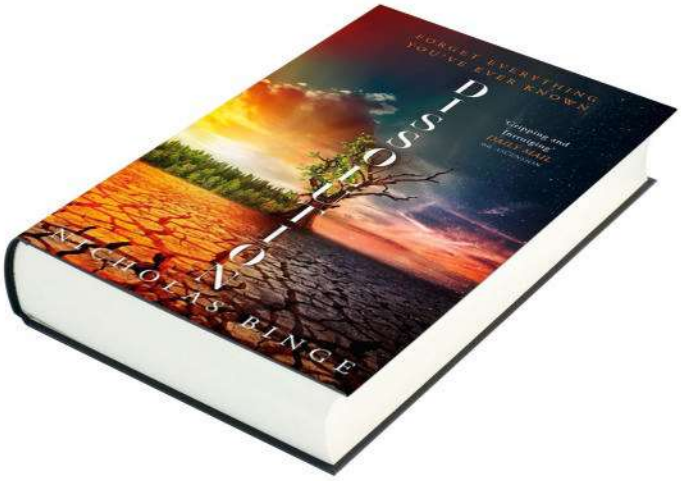
Extras A critical talking head (13 minutes) is the one new feature on this Radiance release. Three useful interviews hail from 2007. Resnais (13 minutes) compares his leading man to "a slightly out of tune violin". Rich (16 minutes) reveals the original plan was to show events from his perspective.

A piece about Sternberg (21 minutes) is mostly critical chat, with snatches of the writer. A thoughtful 2020 doc on Resnais's use of music/sound (55 minutes) has tributes from collaboratoes like *The X-Files*' Mark Snow. Plus: booklet. **Ian Berriman**

ℹ Alain Resnais was a *huge* fan of *The X-Files*, calling Kim Manners (director of 51 episodes) "the ace of aces".

ROUND UP

Surely the death knell for Sony's Spidey spin-offs, **KRAVEN THE HUNTER** (31 March, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD) sees the Russian big game hunter (here spun as an anti-hero) taking on Aleksei Sytsevich (aka Rhino) after his brother's kidnapped. We said: "Leaden, utterly uninspired storytelling." Bonuses: four featurettes (23 minutes); deleted scenes; out-takes. **NOSFERATU** (7 April, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), Robert Eggers's remake of FW Murnau's silent classic, comes to disc in an extended cut (four minutes longer). We said: "Seems to teeter on the brink of a plunge into insanity throughout... A film with its own distinct identity." Extras include director's commentary, a 41-minute Making Of, and three deleted scenes. The latest from cult filmmaker Guy Maddin, **RUMOURS** (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) centres on a G7 summit. Alone in the grounds of a chateau, national leaders encounter reanimated bog bodies and an inexplicable gigantic brain. We said: "The whole exercise feels a little like a joke missing a punchline." No extras here. Demi Moore gives a tour de force performance in satirical body horror **THE SUBSTANCE** (31 March, 4K/Blu-ray/DVD), playing a TV fitness guru who, after being sacked due to her age, injects a serum that splits her in two. We said: "Even if not always logical, it's still stylish, funny and a genuinely unpredictable riot." Extras: just one featurette. Finally, the latest TV box sets include **THE PENGUIN** Season One (out now, Blu-ray/DVD) and **STAR TREK: LOWER DECKS** Season Five (out now, Blu-ray only).



DISSOLUTION

A book of memory and forgetting

★★★★☆

RELEASED 27 MARCH

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Nicholas Binge**

Publisher **HarperVoyager**

We are all products of our memories – and yet our memories are at best unreliable. Worse, for those of us unlucky enough to succumb to degenerative brain conditions, our memories can fade away entirely. As he details in an afterword to *Dissolution*, this is the fate that befell two of Nicholas Binge's grandparents.

But what if your memories weren't to be lost but instead removed? How would someone do this? More importantly, why would they do this? These are the "What if?" questions that underpin Binge's latest book, a strange and compelling slipstream sci-fi thriller.

As to who is having their memories taken, meet Stanley, a brilliant researcher who, from the perspective of his wife, heroine Maggie Webb, is slipping away. In old age, Maggie is undeniably lonely, a situation exacerbated by the fact that she has fallen out with her daughter.

Death lies ahead for Maggie, but not much else – at least until a stranger named Hassan fetches up. Stanley isn't suffering from dementia, says Hassan, but his memories are being taken in order to hide away a long-buried secret. Hassan has a tempting proposition: if Maggie can break into her husband's mind, she can recover the man she once knew.

If that sounds like an offer that's good to be true, it's probably not much of a spoiler to say that's because Hassan is a trickster, a man-cum-creature driven by greed, ego and, most of all, an unwavering belief that he knows best. Should Maggie follow his instructions too closely, it won't just be Maggie and Stanley who will suffer, but the whole of humanity.

Structurally, it's a story told in two parts. In the present, we listen in as Hassan tries to push Maggie into retrieving the secret he's obsessed with discovering, a scenario not so far removed from Christopher Nolan's *Inception*. Gradually, with some authorial hand-waving as to how exactly the technology works, we begin to discover how Hassan has come to wield such vast power.

The other parts are set in the past. Stanley is a figure we first meet as an awkward scholarship boy in the '50s, hopelessly outgunned socially as he attends a posh boarding school. But Stanley's strength lies not in his background but in his raw intelligence, shaped when he encounters an inspirational teacher obsessed with memory tricks, Waldman.

Much of what's best about *Dissolution* lies in its exploration of Stanley's relationships with those around him. This is both a slipstream thriller *and* a book about enduring love that extends behind the first flush of attraction. That's key to making the novel work because Stanley, whom we observe at one point as a young man almost falling out of the world as he's gripped by despair, is someone who makes some questionable moral calls.

In short, he's not always an attractive figure and yet, as you view him through Maggie's eyes, you see why he might inspire love,

> **"What if your memories weren't lost but instead removed?"**

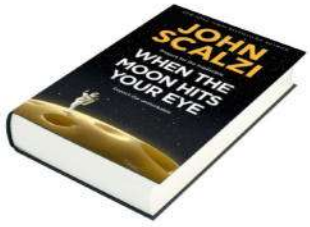
which when it lasts a lifetime isn't blind but rather makes allowances and forgives. More science fiction novels should, perhaps, be about this subject, but then you could say the same of novels in any genre.

Less deftly done are laboratory-set sequences set in the '60s. While the school scenes give off a strong whiff of ink-stained desks, dirty rugby kit and spotted dick, there are moments here where Binge's imagining of the decade of the Beatles and the Stones seems too contemporary, and jars you out of the world. Tighter editing might have helped here.

Nonetheless, as Binge's narratives wrap themselves around each other at the end of the novel, *Dissolution* ends with pleasing, if open-ended, resolution, no mean achievement in a book as ambitious and complex as this.

Jonathan Wright

i Subscriber? Live in Edinburgh?! You may still just have time to buy a ticket for the launch party: Argonaut Books, 27 March.



WHEN THE MOON HITS YOUR EYE

★★★★½

RELEASED 27 MARCH

336 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **John Scalzi**

Publisher **Tor**

What if the Moon really was made of cheese? Daft idea, sure... but what if it did suddenly metamorphose into a giant Mini Babybel overnight? Well, one thing John Scalzi would point out is that it couldn't be a giant Mini Babybel – that'd be silly. Completely wrong density and albedo.

Because what this book does is takes a completely Lunar Tunes concept, then treats the fallout in all seriousness. How would the Moon turning into cheese affect the Earth and its inhabitants – scientifically? Politically? Theologically? Existentially? Artistically?

The book's set over a lunar month, with each chapter spotlighting different sets of characters (though some do make reappearances) on successive days in that cycle, as the situation worsens and the end of civilisation looms. From politicians to songwriters, from scientists to priests, we learn how all of them try to make sense of the new norm in a series of linked short stories.

And it's a blast. Funny, emotional, thought-provoking and scary, it's a whistle-stop tour of the end of the world with some of Scalzi's usual sly social commentary and cultural references (Andy Weir gets a namecheck). Sure, the ending's a tad contrived, but – hey – the whole book's one massive, glorious contrivance. **Dave Golder**

EXTERMINATE/ REGENERATE

★★★★☆

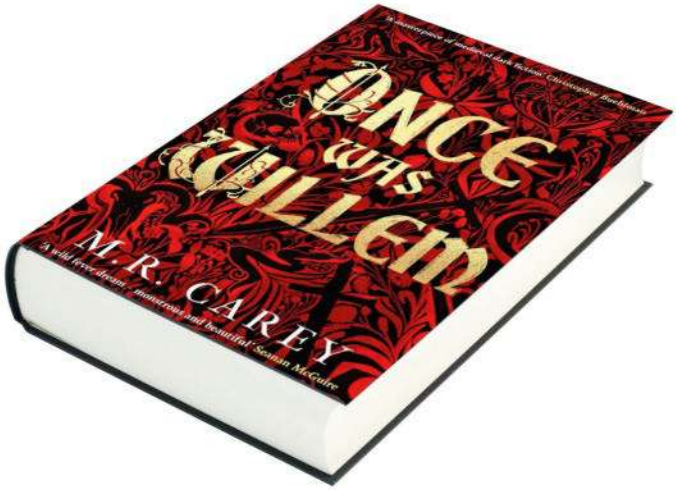
RELEASED 10 APRIL
464 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook
Author **John Higgs**
Publisher **Weidenfeld & Nicolson**

John Higgs has form when it comes to Great British institutions: 2022's *Love And Let Die* mapped the intertwined destinies of James Bond and the Beatles. Now he turns a cultural critic's eye to *Doctor Who*, another world-beating example of Blighty's soft power birthed in the early '60s.

Here's the entire 60-plus years of on-screen fiction and backroom drama, Time Lord heroics and messy human behaviour by those who actually made the show. From Dalekmania to the second coming of RTD, it's an astute, solidly researched overview, albeit one with a gossipy side that occasionally verges on tabloid prurience.

Hardcore fans may fear it's an overfamiliar tale – this is the most documented TV show in history, after all – but there are engaging new theories to share and fascinating connections to trace. We're shown how Susan and the Doctor mirror Little Nell and her nameless grandfather in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, while Peter Davison's decorative celery is reclaimed as nothing less than an act of "Dadaist mischief".

Wildest of all, Higgs argues that *Doctor Who* might almost be a living thing, "the most perfectly evolved story-creating entity that there has ever been." If that's true then this book makes for a fitting biography. **Nick Setchfield**



ONCE WAS WILLEM

SFX Loves

A very English jidaigeki

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
304 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **MR Carey**
Publisher **Orbit Books**

MR Carey, comics writer and author of *The Girl With All The Gifts*, puts a fantasy spin on *Seven Samurai* with *Once Was Willem*, transposing the concept to the English village of Cosham in the twelfth century.

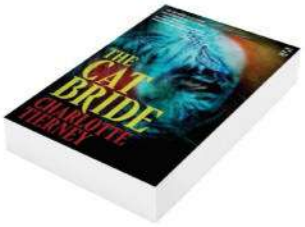
The tale is told by Once Was Willem himself, a boy brought back from the grave by dark magic – unfortunately restored not as his former youthful self, but as a shambling revenant whose grotesque appearance spurs his parents to cast him out. The villain of the story is Cain Caradoc, a malevolent wizard plotting to sacrifice Cosham's children in a bid to gain immortality.

To oppose this vile scheme, Once Was Willem recruits six supernatural allies, including a water spirit, shapeshifting siblings and ghosts, as Cosham's defenders. The setting may be remote from feudal Japan, yet Carey's adventure shares some thematic overlap with Akira Kurosawa's samurai classic. The farmers that Once Was Willem seeks to protect are poor, superstitious, and capable of great cruelty, much like the fearful, fatalistic peasants of *Seven Samurai*, although Carey reserves his sympathies for the outcasts – Once Was Willem and co – and the children. The notion of a group of misfits creating a found family may be a familiar trope, but Carey imbues each of the characters – even Cain Caradoc – with their own colourful histories and distinctive motivations.

The prose is wonderful. Carey has a talent for crafting an inventive turn of phrase, whether capturing the pain and panic of battle or evoking the strange machinations of spellcasting, while the dialogue evokes the feel of Old English without being cumbersome or slowing the pace.

The plot and pacing are similarly impressive, setting up ideas early on that pay off later in a most satisfying manner. Magical, expansive, and inventive, it's a joy to read. **David West**

i MR Carey's other current project is *The Lycan*, a six-issue comic for actor Thomas Jane's Renegade Entertainment.



THE CAT BRIDE

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 7 APRIL
336 pages | Paperback
Author **Charlotte Tierney**
Publisher **Salt Publishing**

Despite the title, there's no wedding in this psychological (but maybe supernatural) horror novel.

The "Cat Bride" is a character in a fairy tale beloved by 16-year-old Loveday, in which a man falls in love with a cat who's been magically transformed into a woman. Loveday herself is on the brink of a transformation, though what she's becoming is open to interpretation.

Her ailing grandmother insists she has a special link to the mysterious big cat that supposedly stalks the moors; her mother says she's just ill. What's the truth? Well, something's killing the livestock, and Loveday can't explain why she keeps waking up naked and covered in blood.

You might think the obvious reference point here is *Cat People*, the 1942 film about a woman who fears she'll become a man-eating panther, but it's really far more similar to Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived In The Castle*. Like Jackson's Merricat, Loveday is an unreliable narrator who might also be a killer, dreaming up creepy rituals to scare off outsiders. Tierney's prose isn't as bewitching as Jackson's, though, and despite its shortish page count, this book drags.

The glimpses we get of Loveday's gran's historical antics are fun, but most of the modern-day narrative is just about cleaning a grubby old house, and the central conflict is never convincing. **Sarah Dobbs**

THE ART AND MAKING OF MICKEY 17

Creeper Show

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 1 APRIL

156 pages | Hardback

Author **Simon Ward**

Publisher **Titan Books**

A test image for "Mama Creeper" in angry mode.

Since it includes a massive colony ship, human-printing technology and a weird alien species, there's plenty to talk about regarding Bong Joon Ho's goofy cloning tale – but this tie-in doesn't deliver on the *Art* part of the title as well as it could.

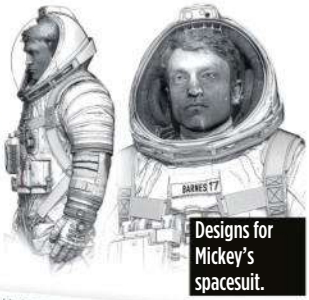
All the right people are interviewed, including the director, production designer and key cast. There are interesting nuggets to be gleaned: the director thought of the alien Creepers as "moving croissants"; Mickey 17 and Mickey 18 are distinguished by a snaggletooth and "cheek plumpers". However, on several occasions, people mention something visually interesting which we don't get to *see*: "graphics and signage everywhere"; "really detailed" vending machines; a "Jeff Koon-style sculpture" of Mark Ruffalo's character.

And the authorial tone can be overly fawning. Is it *really* true that any film by "Director Bong" (as he's referred to) is "identifiably his from only a few seconds of footage"? We'd like to see that tested.

Things pick up once we get to the section on the Creepers; the concept art here is the highlight. But there's only about an hour and a half's reading here. And only about a third of the pages feature anything other than stills. Given the mountains of concept work produced for films like this, it's hard not to feel a tad disappointed. **Ian Berriman**

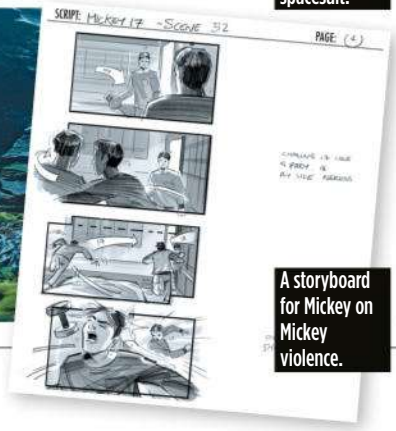
Concepts for the Baby Creeper and its Mama.

Bong Joon Ho and Pattinson chat on set.



Designs for Mickey's spacesuit.

Shooting a meeting of Mickey and Mama Creeper.



A storyboard for Mickey on Mickey violence.

ℹ The scenes where Mickey signs up for the mission to the ice planet Niflheim were shot in the Old City Hall in Bermondsey.

A SONG OF LEGENDS LOST

★★★☆☆

RELEASED 8 APRIL

576 pages | Hardback/ebook/ audiobook

Author **MH Ayinde**

Publisher **Orbit**

It can be hard to see the forest for the trees in *A Song Of Legends Lost*. MH Ayinde crafts a sprawling tale of lost civilisations, mysterious technologies, warring nations and more besides.

In the Nine Lands, those born into noble bloodlines possess the power to bond with the spirits of their ancestors and summon them to fight in battle. That's the official line, but Temi, who belongs to a dirt-poor family of bakers in a slum, discovers that she can summon a spirit from beyond. The spirit, however, has a mind and desires that are all its own.

Ayinde's tale is told from multiple perspectives, with an extensive cast. In the post-*Game Of Thrones* era, fantasy authors all seem determined to paint on the largest canvas possible, and the list of significant characters and clans in the preface fills eight pages. There's a wealth of worldbuilding to digest, but the array of plotlines can squeeze out space for developing the characters' inner lives.

The plot is ripe with mysteries, although despite the length and complexity of the story, Ayinde reveals precious little by the end of this first volume. The prose is strong, and battles are exciting with a potent sense of danger, but the overall experience feels somewhat crowded.

David West

NIGHTWEAVER

★★★☆☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

432 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook

Author **RM Gray**

Publisher **Penguin**

When is a story about pirates *not* a story about pirates? When you make your lead characters pirates and then sink their ship in the first few pages, yank them off the high seas and drop them in a country manor for the rest of the book. It's a weird decision and possibly an unwise one, but RM Gray *just about* manages to make the dissonance work.

Her lead pirate-out-of-water is Violet Oberon, who's still mourning the death of her brother in a sea battle when she's forced into servitude at the home of a wealthy Nightweaver family. Humans have heard terrible stories about the magical Nightweavers: they're evil and they eat our flesh!

Which is why Violet is so shocked when she realises she's falling for her new master, Will. But a revolution is brewing as both humans and Nightweavers must face the wicked Underlings, who can possess people to cause mayhem.

There's a lot going on in this world – politics, gruesome murders, magic – and that's without Violet attracting every handsome man in the land to flirt with her, a trait that becomes a little tiresome. Overwrought, flowery prose is a tad annoying, too.

But there's also something compelling about this fierce, land-locked pirate who will, hopefully, get to sail in her natural environment in the sequel. **Jayne Nelson**

LUMINOUS

★★★★☆

RELEASED OUT NOW!

400 pages | Hardback/ebook

Author **Silvia Park**

Publisher **Magpie**

In a near-future unified Korea, a cyborg cop is trying to locate a missing robot, while his estranged sister is preparing for the launch of a new line of child automatons, and a dying, disabled girl discovers an enigmatic AI in the form of a small boy in a junkyard.

From that summary, Silvia Park's debut may sound like some gnarly cyberpunk noir – and there are certainly elements of that – but it's actually a far more cerebral slice of sci-fi. Set in a world where most humans appear to regard robots as somewhere between a labradoodle and a dishwasher, it's a novel about AI self-determination that addresses what it means to be human by asking "What does it mean to be artificially intelligent?"

Fortunately this goes way beyond the usual "What is this thing you humans call love?" shtick. As one character points out, one of the biggest challenges in making AI more human is programming them how to forget.

Park creates a vivid, detailed world with intriguing, multilayered characters, both mentally and physically scarred. The plot may lose focus occasionally, and the prose is sometimes pithy to the point of losing clarity, but then you get moments of exquisite emotional fragility and captivating visual metaphors. These are robots with dreams way beyond mere electric sheep. **Dave Golder**

THE PRINCE WITHOUT SORROW

★★½☆☆

RELEASED 27 MARCH

384 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook

Author **Maithree Wijesekara**

Publisher **Harper Voyager**

Sure, dragons are cool, but have you considered winged snakes? Similar slinky, scaly aesthetics, but with way less gold-hoarding and maiden-bothering. Plus poisoned fangs are just so much more *stylish* than great big gouts of flame.

Not only does emperor's son Ashoka have his very own flying serpent, but when he gets bored of soaring through the air on its back (as if), his other option is a giant leopard. He's a peace-loving kind of guy – much to his violently expansionist family's disdain – and we'd entirely understand if he spent his days chilling with his menagerie.

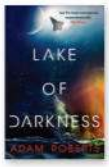
But this is the first volume of a fantasy trilogy, and so obviously trouble is on the horizon. Almost as soon as we enter this South Indian-inspired world, the emperor is cursed to death by a rogue witch, leaving the imperial siblings at each other's throats.

Magical pets aren't the only things to like. The central theme, of characters struggling with a commitment to non-violence in a decidedly non-violent world, is a rich one, and there's a charming will-they-won't-they between Ashoka and his hyper-capable bodyguard, Rahil.

But the plot relies very heavily on unconvincing contrivances and daft character decisions, and the writing is clunky. A decidedly middling debut. **Nic Clarke**

REISSUES

To a degree the literary equivalent of *Event Horizon*, Adam Roberts's latest, **LAKE OF DARKNESS** (★★★★★, 27 March, Gollancz), centres on the murder of the crews of two starships



orbiting a black hole. Captain Raine, the man responsible, claims to have been acting at the behest of a voice emanating from within – as he explains to a historian studying 21st century serial killers. We said: "Deftly interrogates such disparate topics as fandom, faith and the physics of black holes... A devilishly creepy and fiendishly clever SF horror novel." In Kaliane Bradley's debut **THE MINISTRY OF TIME** (★★★★½, 27 March, Sceptre), a London civil servant transfers to a new role, supporting refugees rescued from various

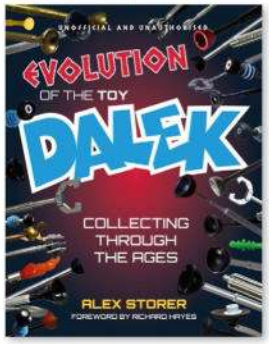
points in the past, and monitoring how they adapt. Will romance blossom with her new housemate, a chap scooped up from a doomed Victorian Arctic expedition? We said: "Has all the touches of a great fish-out-of-water comedy... Both a charming and a provocative read." A follow-up to Jasper Fforde's 2019 book *Shades Of Grey*, **RED SIDE STORY** (★★★½☆, out now, Hodder) returns readers to Chromatacia, a dystopian future UK where people can only see a limited range of the spectrum, and your place

in society is determined by which colours you can perceive. Can forbidden lovers Edward (a lowly Red) and Jane (a Grey) smash the system? We said: "Maybe one for Fforde's existing fans rather than newcomers."

Reviews

BULLET TIME

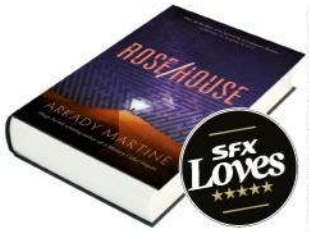
A BOOK IN BULLET POINTS



EVOLUTION OF THE TOY DALEK

RELEASED OUT NOW!
162 pages | Hardback
Author **Alex Storey**
Publisher **Telos Books**

- A handsomely illustrated celebration of pepperpot playthings, from Louis Marx's 1965 friction-drive Dalek to today's Character Options range.
- Photos of the toys are accompanied by packaging and print ads, and grabs of TV commercials.
- Includes pleasingly dramatic shots of Dalek toys posed en masse, or emerging from smoke.
- Interviewees include Product Enterprise packaging artist Graham Humphreys and Bif Bang Pow! founder Jason Lenzi.
- Expect much talk of "skirt accuracy" and "neck bin grille texture". Phwoar!
- A 10-page section details occasions when toys and model kits were used in the TV show itself. Neat!
- Collector Alex Storey provides some personal reminiscences: as a kid, he cut the top off a Louis Marx Dalek to put a plasticine mutant inside. Gasp!



ROSE/HOUSE

★★★★★

RELEASED OUT NOW!
128 pages | Hardback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Arkady Martine**
Publisher **Tor**

Few writers convey nuance as well as Arkady Martine. This much was clear from her Hugo-winning Teixcalaan duology, books that dealt in great part with the intricacies of diplomacy. What we didn't know, at least until the first publication of *Rose/House* as a pricey limited edition in 2023, was that she could also write fiction that conveys a creeping sense of horror.

The story here is straightforward. An AI – or "haunt" – infused into a house designed by the acclaimed architect Basit Deniau phones the cops to let them know there's a dead person in Rose House. Which is a problem from the authorities' point of view because, following Deniau's death, the terms of his will dictate that only his former protégé Selene Gisil is allowed into the building – and she is very much alive.

It falls to Detective Maritza Smith of the China Lake police precinct to try to identify the body and work out what happened – tricky when Rose House has no desire to grant entry to its own inner sanctums. What follows is a locked-room murder mystery that's atmospheric, beautifully plotted and, for all its brevity, conveys a vivid sense of what motivates its protagonists.

Don't expect jump scares, but do expect to sleep uneasily as the eeriness of *Rose/House* pervades your dreams. State-of-the-art SF. **Jonathan Wright**

INCIDENTS AROUND THE HOUSE

★★★★★

RELEASED 27 MARCH
384 pages | Paperback/ebook/audiobook
Author **Josh Malerman**
Publisher **Tor Nightfire**

Josh Malerman is the author of *Bird Box*, which was adapted into a so-so Netflix mega-hit featuring Sandra Bullock in a blindfold. After getting a few chapters into his latest, you'll be the one asking for the blindfold. Not because it's rubbish, but because it's absolutely *terrifying*.

The set-up is deceptively simple. Eight-year-old Bela has a monster living in her closet, a monster that sits with her at night, asking if she'll let the entity "into her heart".

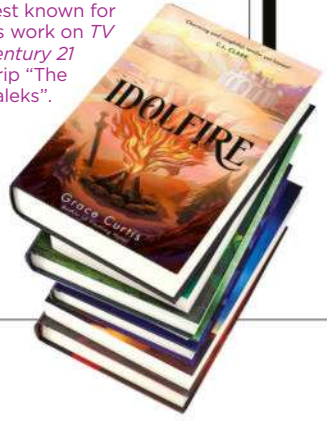
Bela doesn't want to say yes, but she also doesn't want to say no, so she avoids the question. Until the creature starts to leave her closet, and even her room, so it can get the response that it craves...

Taking the time to build Bela into a character you deeply care about, before ramping up the tension to near-unbearable levels by creating incredibly scary situations, *Incidents* is beautifully constructed, even at a formal level. The Cormac McCarthy-style absence of quotation marks creates a near-constant flow that only adds to the nightmare fuel, seamlessly escalating the threat with every passing page.

Like *Bird Box*, it'll get adapted. But they'll have to resurrect Stanley Kubrick to do it justice. Buy it, read it, then try to forget it. It'll haunt you every night until you do. **Sam Ashurst**

ALSO OUT

As ever, there's plenty more books we couldn't quite squeeze in. Inspired by the fall of the Roman Empire, Grace Curtis's **IDOLFIRE** (out now, Hodder) is an epic fantasy with a slow-burn sapphic romance, following two women on an epic journey to find a lost, once-great city. Natasha Pulley's **THE HYMN TO DIONYSUS** (3 April, Gollancz) reimagines the story of the Greek God of ecstasy and madness, revelry and ruin. "*Succession* meets magic" is the pitch for **GIFTED & TALENTED** (3 April, Tor), the latest by *The Atlas Six* author Olivie Blake; after the death of CEO of a "magitech" company, which of his three telepathic children will inherit the business? The latest in the Beyond And Within range, Ghanaian writer Cheryl S Ntumy's **BLACK FRIDAY** (28 March, Flame Tree) collects 18 short stories from Africa (half of them brand new). Expect "dark mysteries, cosy magical realism and cautionary tales". Finally, there are two *Doctor Who*-related biographies. Michael Herbert's **NOTHING IS WHAT IT SEEMS** (out now, bit.ly/hulkebook) explores the life of Malcolm Hulke (creator of the Silurians), surely the only *Who* writer to earn an MI5 file (thanks to his Communist sympathies) – delving into that as well as interviews with friends, family members and colleagues. Meanwhile, John Lawrence's **THE FANTASTIC ART OF RON TURNER** (out now, Telos) is a lavish coffee-table book celebration of the comic artist maybe best known for his work on *TV Century 21* strip "The Daleks".



THE WRITE STUFF
THE SFX AUTHOR QUESTIONNAIRE

Gregory Maguire

The author of *Wicked* has a pretty moving postbag

ANDY NEWMAN

Do you have any personal mementos on your desk?

A small wooden oval box with a photo of Emily Dickinson decoupaged onto the lid, and ornamented in mustard and black paint. Inside are a few small pine cones and dried leaves gathered from the Homestead, Dickinson's Amherst, Massachusetts, recluse. It was painted by Lynn Caponera as a present for Maurice Sendak following an excursion from Sendak's studio in Connecticut to Massachusetts. When Sendak died – he was a dear friend – Lynn [his housekeeper] gave me this token she'd made for him. It had sat upon his desk from 1999 until he died in 2012. It has sat on my desk since.

Is there anything in one of your books you wish you could go back and "fix"?

I think 30 years ago when beginning to write adult novels, I perhaps succumbed to a novice's need to impress my elders. (At that time most of my writing colleagues were a generation or two older.) I perhaps put on too many airs and graces in an attempt to prove to them I was worthy of keeping their company. I don't feel like that any more. Anyway, they're mostly dead.

> **"I've had literally hundreds of testimonial letters"**

Do you have any "bad habits" when it comes to writing?

I do find as I get older that occasionally I will use an adroit metaphor or a comic line, and somebody points out that I have already written something quite similar. This is something I have to watch out for.

What were your favourite books as a child?

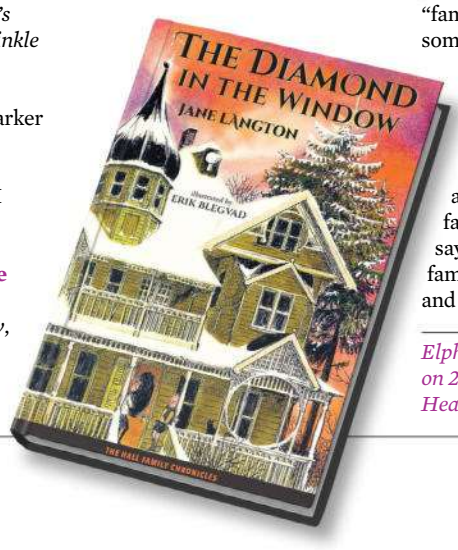
Without yet being able to analyse why, a good many were British fantasies. The classics for a kid of my age and middle-class upbringing: *Mary Poppins*, the Narnia books, *The Children Of Green Knowe* by Lucy Boston. And American fantasies: *Charlotte's Web*, *The Wizard Of Oz*, *A Wrinkle In Time*. Only one was not a fantasy: the American novel *Harriet The Spy*. The nosey-parker heroine is a model for how to become a writer, how to start becoming one as a child, and I followed her example.

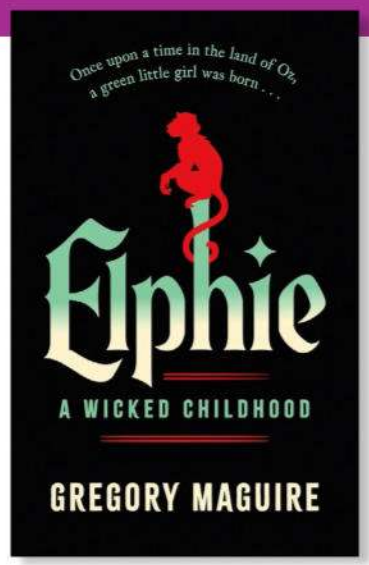
Recommend a book you love that's not very well known.

The Diamond In The Window, by Jane Langton, is a fantasy published almost 60 years ago. While I wouldn't say it hasn't aged a little, the combination of a treasure-hunt plot with a series of chimerical dreams about transcendentalist epiphanies, perfect little parables of deeper meaning that kids can take in, is a real keeper. It changed my life, as *Harriet The Spy* did.

What's the best gift you've received from a reader?

I've had literally hundreds of testimonial letters from people – a lot from gay men, or people with medical crises, or immigrants – about how the story of Elphaba has seen them through great crises in their lives. They remind me that though writers work and live as hermits, the work they do serves an apostolic function, going out to preach mercy to those who need to hear, and have the time and book token or library card.





HARPER AND ROW, PUBLISHERS

What's the biggest misconception people have about being an author?

The notion that writers are "famous" is a curious one. I am sometimes recognised by my name on a credit card, but rarely by my carefully curated public appearance. This is gratifying to me, who is shy. But it's funny to be asked "What is it like to be famous?" My inclination is to say, "Wait until I meet some famous people, and I'll ask them and get back to you."

Elphie: A Wicked Childhood is out on 25 March, published by Headline.

THE NEW GODS

SFX Loves

Fourth World problems

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **DC Comics**

Writer **Ram V**

Artists **Evan Cagle, Jorge Fornés, Jesse Lonergan, Riccardo Federici**

ISSUES 1-4 **Few comics are** as wildly inventive or as spectacularly "of their time" as Jack Kirby's Fourth World saga. Originally published in the early '70s across multiple titles written and drawn by Kirby, it's a mythological sci-fi epic bursting at the seams with bizarre concepts and iconic heroes.

It's also unironically earnest to a staggering degree, packed with melodrama, florid dialogue and offbeat character names like Big Barda, Granny Goodness and Glorious Godfrey. Despite this, Kirby's characters and ideas have been a regular presence in the DC universe for decades, and this new reboot of one of the original Fourth World titles is doing a great job of modernising his vision while still keeping its passion and weirdness intact.

The New Gods is the story of the ongoing battle between the powerful inhabitants of two distant worlds: the peaceful New Genesis, and the hellish Apokolips. This neverending war keeps spreading to Earth, where "New God" Scott Free is trying to live a life of domestic bliss when he's enlisted by his brother Orion for a dangerous quest: find a mysterious child whose powers could tip the balance for good or for evil.

Three issues in, writer Ram V is displaying a fantastic control of the story, giving the characters impactful introductions while setting up a selection of intriguing plot threads and being true to the heightened strangeness of the original comics.

He's also finding new ways of playing into Kirby's mythological concepts, keeping the series dense but accessible to new readers, while experimenting with the story's form and structure.

The result is a rich narrative that's already heading in compelling directions, helped along by artwork that goes against present-day superhero clichés and embraces much weirder traditions.

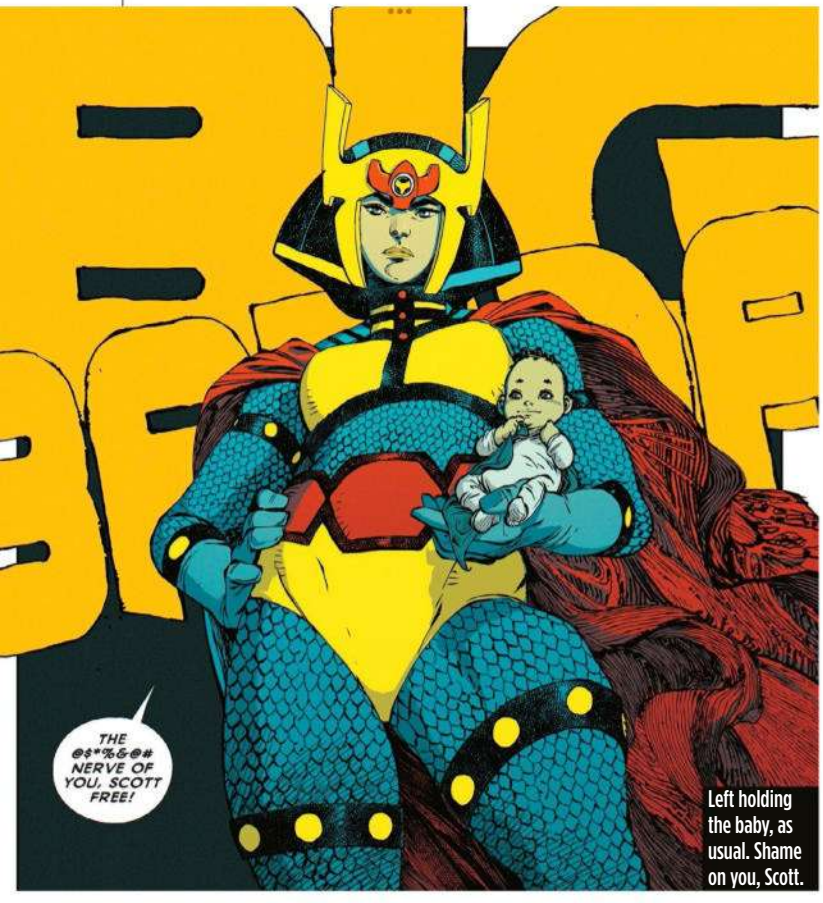
Sensibly realising that doing a direct pastiche of Kirby would be a bad idea, main artist Evan Cagle instead melds Kirby's boldness and vibrancy with lushly designed visuals and ornate page layouts that wouldn't be out of place in a European art comic.

> "A rich narrative that's already heading in compelling directions"

This experimental edge is boosted by regular spots from guest artists in each issue, often tackling epic flashbacks, which heightens the visuals even further, providing the kind of unpredictable edge that a daring, influential title like this deserves.

It all adds up to a genuine slam-dunk that will hopefully run for a long time, and a fresh take on a classic comic that leaves most current superhero titles feeling like unimaginative also-rans.

Saxon Bullock



Left holding the baby, as usual. Shame on you, Scott.

ℹ Kirby created the New Gods while at Marvel in the '60s, and planned for them to rise from the destruction of Asgard.

FML

★★★☆☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**

Publisher **Dark Horse Comics**

Writer **Kelly Sue DeConnick**

Artist **David López**

ISSUES 1-4 **Packing in plenty of** punky attitude and teen angst (alongside the occasional magical transformation), the latest comic from *Captain Marvel* and *Pretty Deadly* writer Kelly Sue DeConnick is a scattershot mix of satirical comedy and fantasy that takes aim at everything from pandemics to crime podcasts.

Set in Portland, Oregon, in an uncomfortably believable near future, *FML* (short for "F*** My Life") is the story of four teenagers who just want to play heavy metal and get through life in one piece. However, when a magic spell causes unintended consequences, and a local podcast festival dredges up dark secrets, things soon get both weird and dangerous.

We're four issues into this eight-issue miniseries, and DeConnick has crafted an episodic, character-centric tale that often has the loose, hang-out vibe of indie comic classic *Love And Rockets*. When it hits the right notes, the blend of punky, anarchic humour and emotion is genuinely enjoyable – but the rambling narrative and haphazard pacing often leave it feeling like a grab-bag of entertaining ideas rather than a coherent story.

David López's characterful art brings an admirably chaotic energy to the series, but it remains to be seen whether or not *FML* can use its remaining four issues to weave its disparate elements into a satisfying ending.

Saxon Bullock

SFX Loves

BATMAN: DARK PATTERNS

★★★★★

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Dan Watters**
Artist **Hayden Sherman**

ISSUES 1-4 **Like *Batman: Year One* meets *The Silence Of The Lambs*,** this enthralling maxiseries takes an unflinching, back to basics approach to the Dark Knight's early years, emphasising detection over gadgets and fisticuffs.

Composed of four three-part arcs, its opening trio of issues introduces the Wound Man, a particularly grisly serial killer. Inspired by the classic medieval diagram, he's covered from head to toe in needles and, ominously – like several other characters we encounter – cannot feel pain.

With no supervillains in sight, writer Dan Watters pits the Bat against some very ordinary adversaries, and shockingly he's even brutally beaten by some extremely hostile everyday citizens.

But while the Joker himself is conspicuous by his absence, Ace Chemicals – the shadowy factory historically associated with the Clown Prince of Crime – is embroiled in the central conspiracy, hinting at some subplots (the titular Dark Patterns) that connect the various storylines.

The prolific Hayden Sherman's fluid linework channels Eduardo Risso and David Mazzucchelli, and is excellently complemented by Triona Farrell's evocative colour. Let's hope this dynamic creative duo return to Batman after their initial year-long remit. **Stephen Jewell**

"I'm done for... just leave me..."
"Righty ho."
THIS MAN'S ALIVE, BARELY, BUT ALIVE!
WE HAVE TO GET HIM TO A DOCTOR!
DON'T MOVE HIM! IT WOULD KILL HIM FOR SURE. REDDY, WHERE'S THE NEAREST HOSPITAL?
AHAHLE...
THERE ARE NONE LEFT STANDING FOR FORTY MILES. HE WILL NOT MAKE IT. I'M SORRY.

JUSTICE LEAGUE UNLIMITED

All Along The Watchtower

★★★★☆

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **DC Comics**
Writer **Mark Waid**
Artists **Dan Mora**

ISSUES 1-4 **DC's premier super-**team has reunited with a literal cast of thousands following the game-changing events of the All In initiative, inviting every hero to join its ranks.

It's exhausting to take in the vast number of characters. Mark Waid wisely focuses on heavy hitters such as Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman and The Flash, while a disembodied Red Tornado acts as an omniscient AI and sturdy support is provided by the more obscure likes of Dr Occult, the Metal Men, Mr Terrific, Swamp Thing's daughter Tefé Holland, and the Green Guardian.

There's also the latest Air Wave, whose apparently lightweight Wi-Fi abilities eventually play a vital role – although given some unspecified connections to main villains Inferno, his motives remain suspect. Consuming the Amazon rainforest in a magical blaze, the super-terrorist organisation are worthy adversaries, and Waid deftly handles the various plotlines – including some stemming from All In, with several heroes' powers (most notably Martian Manhunter's) having subsequently gone AWOL or awry.

As they are all based in the orbiting Watchtower, *Unlimited* has inexorable links with other recent releases such as *Challengers Of The Unknown*, *The Question* and *The Atom Project*. While all are interesting in their own right, this can be confusing if you aren't across events in every title.

Artist Dan Mora impressively juggles the League's limitless ranks, combining imaginative layouts with muscular figurework. Four issues into this long-running storyline, it's great to have the old gang back. **Stephen Jewell**

i Current Air Wave Harold Levey's surname is a nod to the co-creator of the original Air Wave, artist Harris Levey.

SHAKARA: THE COMPLETE COLLECTION

★★★★½

RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
Publisher **Rebellion**
Writer **Rob Williams**
Artist **Henry Flint**

COLLECTION **Nobody does space** opera quite like *2000 AD*, and the long-running anthology's punk-influenced spirit is on full display in *Shakara*, one of its weirder sci-fi epics.

Set in a hyper-violent universe of chaos and disorder, it follows a mysterious entity on a bloodthirsty revenge spree across the cosmos. The titular warrior is out to avenge its dead race, but across the stories presented here there are a satisfying number of twists and turns, along with a surprisingly effective emotional throughline underneath the absurd ultraviolence.

It's packed with wild imagination and demented world-building, with writer Rob Williams doing a great job of pushing the scale of the story to mind-bending extremes. However, it's the visuals from artist Henry Flint that are the real star here, an eye-popping mix of black-and-white art with splashes of vivid colour.

He's one of the few artists who can get close to equalling the late Kevin O'Neill for sheer grotesque invention, and *Shakara* showcases Flint's lurid talents to maximum effect. The full-on violence occasionally gets a little wearing – this is a 320-page volume best consumed in short bursts – but the result is still a ferociously enjoyable pulp adventure. **Saxon Bullock**

AVOWED

Back in the Lands of the Living

★★★½☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PC**
- Also on **Xbox Series X|S**
- Publisher **Microsoft**

VIDEOGAME **After years of smaller** scale releases, the developers behind *Fallout: New Vegas* return with another big-budget first-person RPG. While set in the same fantasy universe, Eora, as *Pillars Of Eternity*, this ditches the name for good reason – *Avowed* is a fresh start that requires no prior knowledge of those games.

You've got magic spells, dwarves and skeleton warriors, but Eora's strangeness packs plenty of unique flavour too. Reincarnation is a fact of life, twin moons hang in the sky, and the many gods directly wreak havoc amid their clashing followers. *Avowed* centres on the Living Lands, a region claimed by no god that's become ground zero for a fungal plague called the Dream Scourge which essentially zombifies those affected.

Playing the Envoy of Aedyr, you're sent to rendezvous with Aedyr's embassy on the continent and get to the bottom of things. As a Godlike, one soul-touched by a divine entity, you've got the power to make a difference – though unlike most experiencing divine intervention, you don't know to which god you've been tethered.

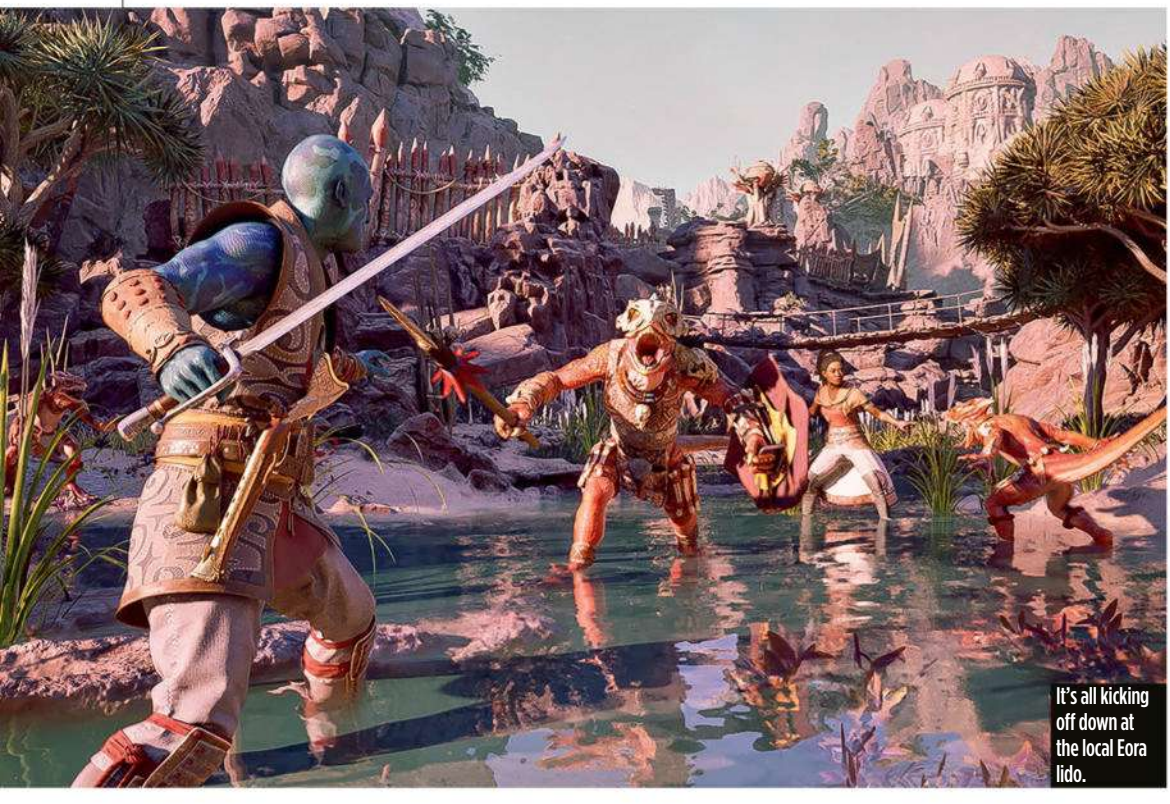
While you create some of your Envoy's background, many details are actively decided through play and dialogue choices, wonderfully mimicking a tabletop RPG experience. It's good to see Obsidian staying true to their roots even with a more immersive and action-focused perspective. Simply exploring the detailed and large maps – split into discrete regions – is rewarding, and you do a modest amount of parkour while scrambling over every nook and cranny imaginable. Often unmarked puzzles and ruins hide actual treasures, and feel satisfying to work out.

The cast of companions you meet and fight alongside are pleasant enough company, feeling well-drawn. Though your companions do highlight where Obsidian have had to focus their efforts; after a while, they quickly run out of dialogue options in camp, and while handy in a fight, they're so automated that you may forget they're there.

Scrapping as yourself, though, is a joy. These high-impact first person clashes make you feel every close-call parry with your shield. Combat is highly customisable to boot. *Avowed* is a game where you can spell-sling with your left hand, and cock a flintlock pistol with your right – reason enough to roll the dice.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

i Several of the achievement names – like Big Iron On Your Hip and Two Bears High-Fiving – are nods to *Fallout: Las Vegas*.



It's all kicking off down at the local Eora lido.

DOCTOR WHO: GENESIS OF THE CYBERMEN

★★★★☆

- **RELEASED OUT NOW!**
- Running time **118 minutes**
- Format **CD/download**
- Publisher **Big Finish**

AUDIO DRAMA **Peter Davison's** Fifth Doctor finds himself on Mondas before the days of the Cybermen... hang on, haven't we heard this one before? Yep, that's the basic synopsis of both this release and 2002's wonderful *Spare Parts*.

This isn't a case of Big Finish repeating itself, however. Where that story was a brand new tale, *Genesis* is part of the Lost Stories strand, inspired by an idea that Cybermen co-creator Gerry Davis pitched to the *Doctor Who* office in the '80s. It was rejected and a full script never written, until now.

The TARDIS crew find themselves on a suspiciously Earth-like world ruled over by the twin princes Dega and Sylvan. After an accidental 50-year leap forward in time, however, the Doctor and company find a transformed world, one where a more desperate and dangerous Dega is determined that his people will survive – whether they like it or not.

Davis's original idea was vague enough (and intended for a single generic companion) that writer David K Barnes is able to make the story his own, adding in Tegan, Nyssa and Adric. While not as haunting as *Spare Parts*, this is still a well-told tale, and the Mondasian Cybermen remain one of *Who*'s most unnerving monsters. **Will Salmon**

STARBURST: THE ALBUM

★★★★☆

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Running time **44 minutes**
- Format **CD/vinyl/download**
- Label **Fab Records**

ALBUM **Older readers may** remember the phenomenon of the knock-off sci-fi soundtrack album: generically titled collections of themes performed by jobbing orchestras. *SFX* even put one out back in 1998 (*Sound FX*, yours for one 1p on Discogs).

Well, this handsome new release from The British Stereo Collective (aka producer Phil Heeks) is something even stranger: a collection of 16 themes to shows that don't exist, plus two brief idents. The opening "Moonbase Britannica" is a wonderfully cheesy disco cut, reminiscent of Meco's *Star Wars And Other Galactic Funk*, while other tracks touch on minimal synth ("The Queller Tapes") and faux library music ("Ghosts Of Us").

Some of the themes are winkingly titled pastiches of real shows: "Death Detectives" has some of the spectral organ of *Randall And Hopkirk (Deceased)*, while "Galaxy Pirates" recalls the bold fanfare of *Battlestar Galactica*.

Packaged as a homage to the long-running sci-fi magazine *Starburst*, it comes with a 24-page "special issue" with features on various of those fake series. A brilliantly realised evocation of an era, it will appeal to fans of Ghost Box Records, although listeners not clued into the concept may find the intentional naffness of some of the sounds a bit much.

Rob Lockwood

The Seikret go to the same hairdresser as Mrs Slocombe.

MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

Atop Seikret

★★★★½

- RELEASED **OUT NOW!**
- Reviewed on **PS5**
- Also on **PC, Xbox Series X|S**
- Publisher **Capcom**

VIDEOGAME **A new land to explore,** home to new monsters, mysteries, and an ecosystem in chaos – so far so *Monster Hunter*, but *Wilds* is a new high bar for the series in which you... well, hunt monsters and capture them.

Maps are more interconnected than ever, and include a base camp so that you never have to leave the action. Likewise, new raptor-like mounts (the Seikret) are able to scoop you up and auto-run towards any set target, breezily whisking you away from danger. The motto of *Monster Hunter Wilds*: don't sweat the small stuff.

What you *do* have time to sweat is the clashes with the massive monsters themselves. Extremely varied, these are a range of past favourites and newcomers, diverse in their appearance and the way they behave, while also neatly tied to the biomes they inhabit. You've got huge sandworms that duck and dive through dunes, creepy spiders that weave webs overhead, and ethereal, gravity-defying skeletal ice dragons.

A story mode leads you through key encounters, while you can also explore as you want, with the time of day and changeable weather affecting which beasties are active. To match them, you have 14 chunky weapons with flashy combos to aid you in either felling or capturing them, alongside other hunters online.

Thanks to huge improvements in netcode, playing with pals or strangers is smoother than ever, even allowing cross-platform play – no hunter ventures alone. *Wilds* is *Monster Hunter* at its most bestial, but it gives you the tools to turn it into prey ripe for the hunt, offering a thrill like little else in gaming at the moment.

Oscar Taylor-Kent

i Inspirations for new monster the Quematrice included the T. rex (skeletal structure) and Nile monitor lizard (teeth).

RECORD STORE DAY

The vinyl-geek event returns on 12 April. Here's a few highlights you may deem worth queuing for

CANNIBAL FEROX

Budy Maglione's cheesetastic soundtrack for Umberto Lenzi's 1981 jungle-trip video nasty has been remastered from the original tapes. Who can resist an LP with track titles like "Jaywalkin' Iguana", "Piranhas!" and "Jungle Jive"? It comes on bloody red vinyl, *of course*.

THE NEVERENDING STORY

The soundtrack for the 1984 fantasy favourite features both German jazz musician Klaus Doldinger's orchestral cues and electro great Giorgio Moroder's techno-pop treatments. Don't forget to get your keytar out and sing along with Kajagoogoo's Limahl on the theme tune. Comes on starlight patterned vinyl.

THE SERPENT AND THE RAINBOW

The spooky score for Wes Craven's 1988 horror centred on zombification in Haiti was composed by Brad Fiedel, best known for his work on *The Terminator*, and being heavy on ominous synths and percussion there are definite similarities between the two. This is a gatefold two-disc set, on "Vodou Blue" vinyl.

7 DOORS OF DEATH

Fabio Frizzi's score for Lucio Fulci's 1981 zombie horror *The Beyond* is a classic, but there was also an alternate version for the US cut. It's the solitary soundtrack credit of a pair of New York producers, brothers Mitch and Ira Yuspeh – most successful, fact funs, for a series of bestselling '80s cassettes of funny answering machine messages.

Blastermind
The SFX quiz

DREAMS

This issue's quiz involves quick thinking *and* some rapid eye movement. And please, don't have nightmares...

Quizmaster **Ian Berriman, Deputy Editor**

QUESTION 1
There are nine *A Nightmare On Elm Street* films. How many of them have "Dream" in their title?

QUESTION 2
Who stars as Dream in the TV version of *The Sandman*?

QUESTION 3
Name the actor who played the Dream Lord in the 2010 *Doctor Who* episode "Amy's Choice".

QUESTION 4 Picture Question
Identify this film from the dream sequence.

QUESTION 5
Which foodstuff makes multiple inexplicable appearances across the Scooby Gang's dreams in the *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* episode "Restless"?

QUESTION 6
And in the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episode "Phantasms", what foodstuff does Data dream about Troi being turned into?

QUESTION 7
In *Twin Peaks*, what "good news" does the dwarf in the Red Room have for Agent Cooper?

QUESTION 8 Picture Question
Identify this film from the dream sequence.

QUESTION 9
What do *Invaders From Mars*, *Nightmare City*, *Phantasm* and *The Wizard Of Oz* all have in common?

QUESTION 10
In *The Fly*, Geena Davis's character Veronica has a nightmare about giving birth to a giant maggot. Who plays the doctor that delivers it?

QUESTION 4

QUESTION 8

QUESTION 12

QUESTION 16

QUESTION 11
In the *Director's Cut* (and *The Final Cut*) of *Blade Runner*, what does Deckard dream about?

QUESTION 12 Picture Question
Identify this film from the dream sequence.

QUESTION 13
In *Inception*, what song does Cobb's team of extractors use to awaken their team members?

QUESTION 14
Name the episode of *The Prisoner* in which Number Two tries to find out why Number Six resigned by observing his dreams.

QUESTION 15
In *Brazil*, Sam Lowry dreams of battling a giant samurai. What does he find under its mask?

QUESTION 16 Picture Question
Identify this film from the dream sequence.

QUESTION 17
Which author wrote the 1933 short story "The Dreams In The Witch House"?

QUESTION 18
Batman: The Animated Series and *The Twilight Zone* both have episodes titled "Perchance To Dream". Which famous work is this phrase taken from?

QUESTION 19
Who played psychic Alex Gardner in the 1984 film *Dreamscape*?

QUESTION 20
In *Doctor Who*, how are the alien creatures the Kantrofarri more commonly known?

Answers
1 Three 2 Tom Sturridge 3 Toby Jones 4 *An American Werewolf In London* 5 Cheese slices 6 A cake 7 "That gum you like is going to come back in style." 8 *Day Of The Dead* 9 "It was all a dream" endings 10 David Cronenberg 11 A unicorn 12 *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* 13 "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien" 14 "A. B. and C." 15 His own face 16 *Carrie* 17 HP Lovecraft 18 *Hamlet* 19 Dennis Quaid 20 Dream Crabs

How did you do?
What kind of dream are you?

0-5
Falling to your death

6-10
Naked in public

11-15
Going on holiday

16-19
Flying

20
Winning the lottery

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SFX

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"Get back to work, hot buns"

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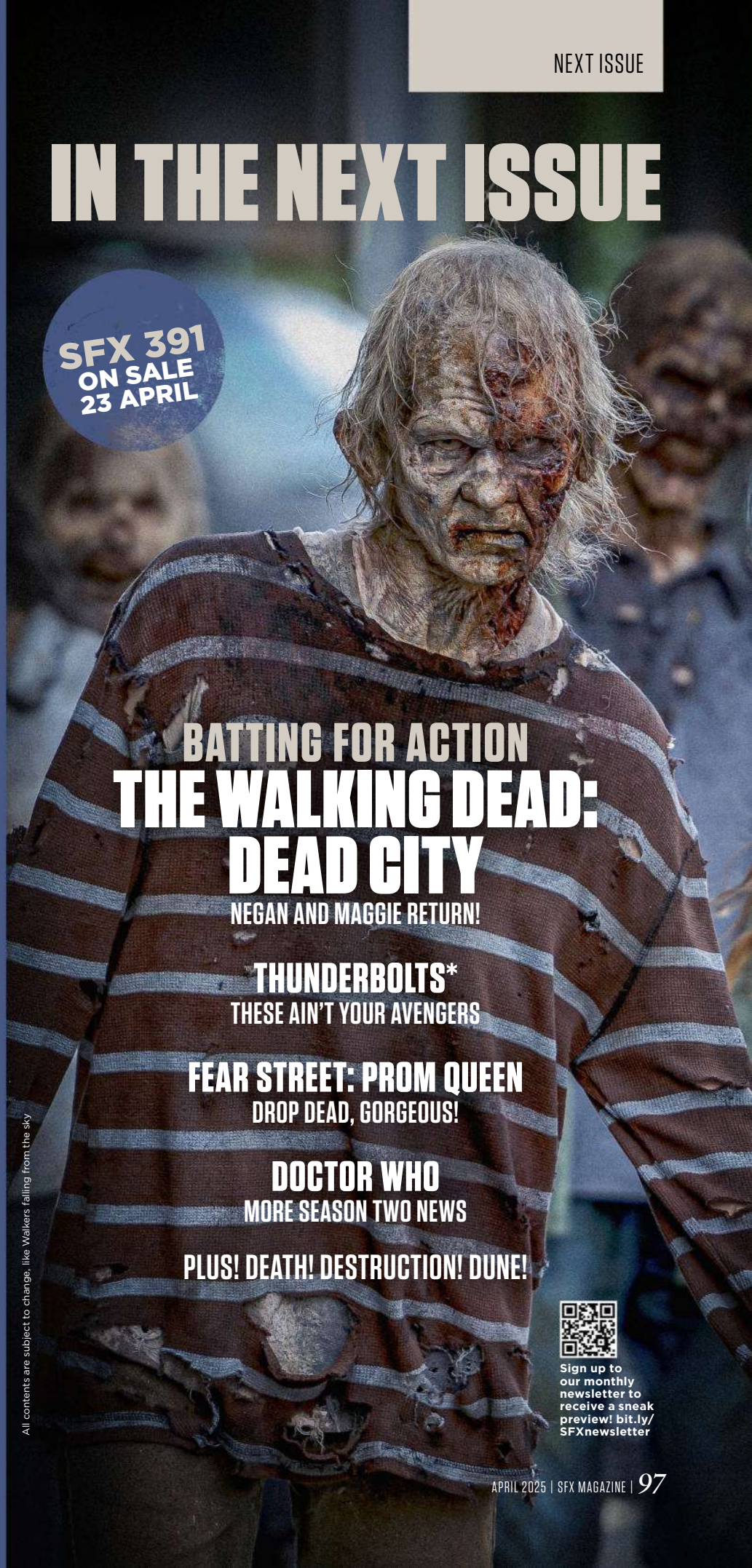

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Liz Danforth's iconic cover art for the Fifth Edition.

Tunnels & Trolls

David West, freelance writer

"The Rock Demon goes totally berserk and hurls the magic keg. You are hit in the head, and your brains turn to beer. This character is totally useless from this point on – close the book."

Ouch. If *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was the serious, grown-up RPG with its exhaustive rule system chronicled in weighty, expensive hardcover volumes, *Tunnels & Trolls* – which marks its 50th anniversary this year – was its goofy kid brother. Superficially, the two systems had plenty in common, with players rolling dice to determine the outcome of events and character traits like Strength, Dexterity and Intelligence, but that's where the similarities mostly ended.

Playing *T&T* was equal parts escapist fantasy heroics and gleeful absurdity. Wizard spells included the whimsical "Take That, You Fiend!" and "Upsidaisy". Sure, your character could be a conventional human, elf or dwarf, but equally you could play as a fairy or leprechaun. Or a were-crocodile. No, really; it was right there in the Fifth Edition rulebook.

One of the game's major attractions was that you could be your own Games Master with Solo Adventures like *Naked Doom*, *Sword For Hire* or *Buffalo Castle*, which predated classic gamebooks like *The Warlock Of Firetop Mountain*. It was these that really defined the mischievous tone of *T&T*.

One wrong choice, one bad role of the dice, and you were done. "You suffer spontaneous combustion and are reduced to a pile of ashes" and "The genie grabs you by the neck and twists your head off" were just two of the cruel instant deaths awaiting the unfortunate in *Sorcerer Solitaire*.

The twisted sense of humour was epitomised by *Grimtooth's Traps*, a volume devoted entirely to inventive and violent booby traps designed to maim, crush and puree adventurers. Woe betide the party that stumbled upon the Delvermatic Dicer And Malingerer Trap, with its hidden spikes, catapult floor and human-sized cheese-grater.

Where *T&T* excelled was the thrill of the sugar rush, offering adventures that were short, sharp and fun. Inevitably, the lure of longform campaigns and developing a single character over weeks and months eventually drew me from *T&T* towards the fiendishly labyrinthine rules of *AD&D*. But when adult responsibilities and lack of time led me to sell my *AD&D* books, I hung onto my beloved *T&T* adventures, as battered as any survivor of Grimtooth's merciless machinations.

David has never really recovered from his brain turning into beer.

Fact Attack!

- In 1976 *T&T* creator Ken St Andre published *Monsters! Monsters!*, in which players take on the role of monsters fighting dungeon explorers.
- Unlike *D&D* and *AD&D* with their dizzying array of many-sided dice, *T&T* merely required three ordinary six-sided dice to play.
- Just as *AD&D* had supporting magazines like *White Dwarf*, *T&T* had a quarterly publication called *Sorcerer's Apprentice*.
- In 2015, *T&T*'s original publishers Flying Buffalo released the 166-page *Deluxe Tunnels & Trolls*, which is available to buy as a PDF.
- *2000 AD* publisher Rebellion has announced plans for a new edition of *Tunnels & Trolls*, but there's no word yet on a release date.

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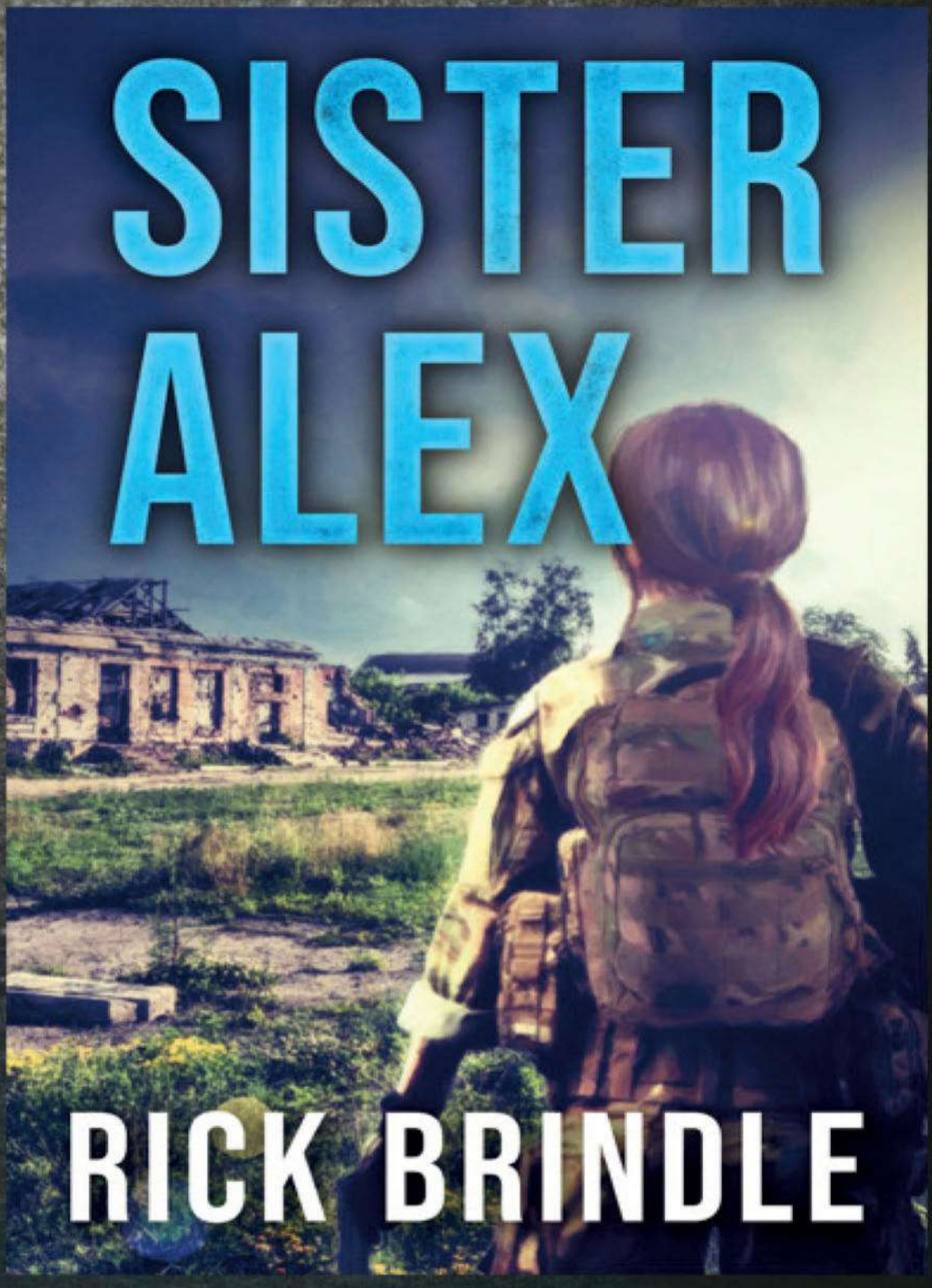
After the apocalypse, it's a woman's world



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